

Learning Uncut Episode 93: Partnering for Learning Innovation
Siva Kulasingam and Rodney Beach
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

What do you do when you can't find the technology that you need to realise your vision for digital learning in your organisation? When faced with this situation Siva Kulasingam from Coles Group went out to the market to find a partner who was bold and open enough to experiment, test and learn with them. In today's episode he is joined by Rod Beach from Liberate Learning to discuss how they took risks and pushed boundaries to create App e-Learn.

I had heard of App e-Learn before this conversation but had no idea of the extent of innovation that went into creating this tool. It was actually a surprising discovery to me to hear about this fabulous example of partnering between supplier and customer in the learning industry. I hope you draw inspiration and ideas to help you to set up great partnerships and push the boundaries to achieve your own vision for learning in your organisation or with your clients if you are a vendor.

The other thing I encourage you to consider is whether you need to improve your knowledge of learning technology. During this episode Rod notes that he is constantly educating the market (that is, L&D professionals in organisations who are making decisions about learning technology), and that they often don't understand what they are asking for. I've included some suggestions in the show notes about people and organisations to follow if you want to stay abreast of learning tech. I urge you to do your own research as you shape your learning technology stack or seek to get the most out of the tech available to you.

With that, let's move on to the conversation.

Welcome to Learning Uncut Siva, it's nice to have you here.

Siva Kulasingam:

Thank you. Thanks for having me.

Michelle Ockers:

And Rod, welcome.

Rodney Beach:

Thank you.

Michelle Ockers:

So let's start with you, Siva. We'd like to do some introductions just to set the scene first. You are from Coles Group. Would you like to introduce us to Coles Group?

Siva Kulasingam:

Sure. So Coles Group as you know is an ASX listed company which has several brands across the different lines of business. The more obvious is the supermarkets, liquor and express fuel that you would commonly see. It's supported by our

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distribution centres, and head offices across the states. So all up, as an organization, we have over 120,000 team members over 2000 sites all around the country.

Michelle Ockers:

And, of course, for any of our Australian listeners, you will be intimately familiar with Coles as one of our major retail chains here in Australia. Does Coles actually operate overseas? I don't think you do, do you Siva?

Siva Kulasingam:

We do have an office in China, a small office, yes.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. But predominantly Australian. So Siva, what is your role in the organization and how long have you been working in that role and with your team?

Siva Kulasingam:

Been with Coles for about four years now. My role as the digital learning manager is essentially looking at all things digital learning at an enterprise level. That's sort of being the source of truth when it comes to delivering learning to our team members, maintaining their learning profiles and records, and supporting the business with their respective digital learning content development and management.

Michelle Ockers:

And, of course, everybody in L&D these days is acutely aware of the value of digital learning. For those who weren't ahead of the game like yourself, Siva, everyone had to make adjustments if they weren't already there in the digital space in 2020. And Rod your organization of course has been playing in the digital space for some time. Would you like to introduce us to your organization?

Rodney Beach:

Yeah, Liberate Learning. We specialize in custom learning, and with the main focus of digital. So custom digital learning for medium to large organizations, fairly evenly split between corporate government and education typically.

Michelle Ockers:

Is it just content development? I believe and we are going to talk about a platform today, so the organization also has a platform?

Rodney Beach:

We do, yeah. It's just a sister organization called App-eLearn has a platform. That's built from the Adapt framework, and we've just enhanced that which we can cover off in a bit more detail. And we do set up some learning management system, some sort of tactical type learning management systems for people, but it's mostly in that authoring and development design space.

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Michelle Ockers:

Okay, so we've got Liberate who are in the authoring and development space, and then App-eLearn is a sister organization did you say then, Rod?

Rodney Beach:

It is, yeah. So that's like a, I suppose, software as a service. It's an authoring tool to enable people to design and develop it, and I guess our main brand of Liberate Learning is the services where we have the learning designers and developers and artists to create learning assets.

Michelle Ockers:

And they do that across any range of platforms, right, it's not that you're tied to that platform being the one you developed for?

Rodney Beach:

That's right. We've got to be agnostic to any platform but we will build on whatever the client needs us to build on.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So let's come back to you Siva, and I think our story starts about two and a half years ago. But if that's not the right spot to pick it up, you just guide us to where you want to pick up the timeline. Can you describe what digital learning looked like at that point in time in Coles?

Siva Kulasingam:

Yeah, so like most corporates in Australia, we were no different in terms of struggling with an old LMS. We restricted to just SCORM-based e-learning and face-to-face workshops. And as learning function, we were struggling to make the shift towards the relevant industry trends around micro learning, using different asset types to enable curated and social learning. So I guess our vision was really to re-imagine the way in which we deliver digital learning to our team members in a digital era really. And we wanted to improve the experience and the content that they were receiving and to provide them with options around flexibility in the way they learn and the devices they use. And that meant for us to move towards a mobile-first approach.

So this meant a whole range of changes. It was the way in which we approach our learning platform, the way we develop our content, and the partners we work with.

Michelle Ockers:

So speaking of partners, you knew you'd need to find partners to work towards this vision. What were you looking for in partners, and how did you go about finding them?

Siva Kulasingam:

Well firstly, we needed them to be aligned with our vision. They needed to understand where we were coming from, what we were aspiring to do, and have a strong willingness to collaborate with us and to be part of this journey. It was not an easy journey. It was not something that was clearly mapped out, and so I guess there was a level of willingness to experiment and test and learn with us.

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Secondly, we also needed them to work within our requirements. Some of them were a bit unfortunately restrictive, like poor internet bandwidth, and in other instances, high standards like our accessibility guidelines.

Michelle Ockers:

So when you say you had a vision, but some of it wasn't clear cut, you needed someone to help experiment, test, and learn, what did you know about what you wanted in terms of the vision, and where was there this level of we're not quite sure but directionally this is where we're heading?

Siva Kulasingam:

I think the first thing that we noticed was that within the market in the industry, there wasn't really a lot of authoring tools that supported that mobile first approach to development. I mean, there's heaps out there that are somewhat responsive, but if you're really going to be true about mobile first we needed to have confidence in a tool that would get us there. And as we were searching and having conversations around, we were struggling to find that.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So Rod, how did Liberate get involved in this and what sort of brief were you given? How did you feel about this brief? So Siva was talking about directionally, this is what we want. We know there's nothing out there that can do what we want right now. And oh, by the way, we've got high standards and there's these restrictions around internet bandwidth. Like that's kind of a bit of an overwhelming brief. So talk to us about firstly, how you got involved and what your response was to that brief.

Rodney Beach:

Yeah. Well, Siva has been around in the industry for a long time, so I guess we talked similar language, and the brief was pretty clear to me of where Siva wanted to go, and it was just a matter of how to enable him to go there because I'm working with the tools and the years of experience. There was nothing that met Siva's requirement and in the very sort of high level as you were saying of high level of accessibility, true mobile responsive, not manually creating break points, relatively easy to use but at the same time these have that sort of high polished look to it. Naturally, you'd expect to be SCORM compliant, but also natively xAPI enabled to allow tracking on a learning record store. And at the time, I'm not sure whether it's the case now, but certainly, at the time nothing that we could find in the world existed on that brief. So I suppose—

Michelle Ockers:

Rod, if I can just ask you just to elaborate what was the most challenging part of that brief because some of that would have existed? Was it that there were elements that didn't exist at all, but putting it all together? And what were the bits that were hard to find kind of the functionality already in one place together?

Rodney Beach:

Yeah, easy to use but still develop sort of themes and concepts, and the end product that was of a high standard still. So as Siva said, there are some tools and they can create some minimal viable product type response solutions that are fairly basic in look, feel, and appearance in the way that they're presented. And as Siva said, that

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there's a 120,000, 125,000 staff within Coles. So naturally, we're looking for fit for purpose type solutions for that volume of audience. We're not trying to launch something for 50 or 150 people. So that high standard, but probably the biggest would be around just with the accessibility and fine-tuning that.

But again, the Achilles heel that was a challenge for quite a while was making it natively xAPI enabled as well. So when I say natively xAPI I'm not talking about manually touching and retro fitting things into SCORM packages. I know I'm using a few sort of tech jargon phrases here, but something where you can just plug and play so to speak that it natively maps that xAPI tracking data in it, much like a traditional tool would publish at a SCORM standard.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, can we talk about xAPI a little bit more? I haven't actually had many podcast stories about xAPI. Although, it has been around for quite some time, it may be a little unfamiliar to some of the listeners. So I don't mind which of you picks up this conversation, but what is xAPI and why is it important or why was it important in your context?

Siva Kulasingam:

Sure, I'm happy to kick off. I guess as you mentioned, xAPI has been around for a while. It's actually a new industry standard, and so for us, was actually trying to match the new industry standard, although not many people were doing it. What it does is it gives us more data and tracking beyond just the basics around has someone completed a module or not. It gives us data and a level of richness in that standard which talks to - and I guess the three components within it will be an actor, an action, and the verb. So if Michelle started a page or program, it would track statements underneath a learning module or a completion. So on average, you would have anywhere between 60 to 80 statements for just a single piece of module that you might be completing, and that's much far and above what you'd get out of a standard learner management system.

Michelle Ockers:

And what's the value of having all of that extra data, Siva?

Siva Kulasingam:

It gives us the ability to understand how our users are interacting, if there are certain points in which they are struggling with the content. And also when it comes to understanding user behaviours. So that's one of the key things that we probably don't know enough of, and it helps us change the conversation that we have with our stakeholders around what they think is right because now, we're armed with more data to go back and have this conversation to say well, that thing that you think you need to train them on because you think they do not know - guess what, they actually know their stuff, and this is the data that tells us that.

Michelle Ockers:

That's very powerful

Okay. So you've got this brief. You've looked around and the brief actually can't be met with anything that's available at the moment. So what happens next, Rod?

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Rodney Beach:

Fear factor. That was a fear factor. I guess we like to think that sort of the cutting edge of what's happening with the technology, we live and breathe by learning and digital learning, and then Siva has given us a brief of something that can't be met, can't be achieved. So I guess it was that catalyst to say, okay, well, what do we do here? Do we run a mile and just hope that he never mentions it again or do we bite this off, and if we do, how are we going to tackle it? And I guess the thinking was and Siva had some great ideas and it was a great solution ever could be produced, and I guess it just come to that point in time where we thought if we don't do it someone else is going to do it, so let's lead the pack rather than follow

Michelle Ockers:

Right. So it took a little bit of courage, but you decided to take the leap with a partner who is going to push you to do it, right Rod?

Rodney Beach:

Absolutely, yeah. As a push, then comfort zones were pushed. But it was you've got to do that. You've got to do that if you want to stay modern and relevant.

Siva Kulasingam:

You did ignore me for a while, but I didn't give up.

Rodney Beach:

I tried but Siva was pretty adamant that he wanted this type of solution, and it was a fantastic solution. I guess that was the attractiveness to us. It wasn't just some abstract concept. It was like the thought that the brief that Siva has got, and where he was going with learning and digital learning and big data and learning analytics is the future is, and that's where people are going to go. It's just that Siva happened to be the first one that I wanted to go there.

Michelle Ockers:

So Siva but talk to us about today. What does digital learning look like at Coles today?

Siva Kulasingam:

Well, we've expanded the scope of learning. That's the first thing that we've been able to do, and also the kind of experiences that the our team members get, so in terms of different asset types. We were just looking back in terms of our records as well. So when we used to have the old LMS about four years ago, we were registering about 800,000 learning completions a year. And last year, we registered about 8 million. So that's quite a significant jump, and that's predominantly got to do with the changes that we've made.

And second thing that we noticed was the number of queries also reduced when we started making this shift into a mobile first approach. By changing the tool as well, we notice that we're not getting that many break points, and so our team members were getting a better experience. They're not getting frustrated. There are some things that are beyond our control naturally, but at least, we knew that the tool was sound, and that was not one of the contributing factors. And I guess the other thing is also

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having the data to back it up, and to actually do a deep dive as and when we're required to.

Michelle Ockers

You talked a little bit about the data before and having good quality data about user behaviours that you can actually engage in a different kind of conversation with your stakeholders. What sort of impact do you think that's had on the organization, and if you've got any example that you can share to bring that to life, that would be of a conversation you've had and something specific you've been able to pull out and share that links to business impact if you're able to answer that question, tell us a little bit about that, that could be interesting.

Siva Kulasingam:

I think it's similar to what I mentioned earlier where we had the business come to us, which what they thought was a problem, and wanted training to be the solution and to fix the problem. And we actually were able to pull up data from previous completions to go "Well, if you think this is the problem, well, the results actually tell you otherwise. So it's not a knowledge gap we're trying to fill here. So whatever it is that is stopping them from performing needs to be addressed." So there are other barriers that are getting the way of performance and knowledge is not one of them. So to actually sit down and have that conversation and have the business have that aha moment to take a step back and go actually, I'm not going to invest in learning again, I have to deep dive and understand the problem a bit more, it's kind of a significant shift.

And for me to have that frank conversation to them and say well, I can build a module. That's not a problem. But you're going to come back to me in six months' time and tell me you've got the same issue again. So let's save each other the pain, and actually look at the data, what the data is telling us, and investigate what else is going on.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay and that that's really powerful to be able to shift the conversation like that and have the data to do that.

Rod let's talk about—let's get a little bit technical now. I'm a lay person so if you lose me, I think I can bring you back in to keep the audience on track for those who are not so technical. From a technical perspective, can you talk us through—you mentioned before you built up a base platform called Adapt can you talk us through how you developed the App-eLearn platform to actually help achieve this vision that Siva had laid out.

Rodney Beach:

Yeah. I'll mention maybe up front for those that aren't familiar with digital learning first the relationship between like Moodle as a learning management system versus Totara as an example. So one's a freeware and the other one's like an enterprise one or a corporate sort of commercial version. I guess there's a similar principle. So there's an Adapt community. We grabbed the Adapt framework initially, and we're able to get that running. And we started to enhance that and tweak that and modify that, add some community plugins that are created anywhere around the world, and

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then put in a bunch of custom components, and making sure that what we're putting in it is sound. Then do an awful lot of hacking in the back end to get it to do things that we want it to do that it doesn't natively do.

Michelle Ockers:

So what was the most technically what was the most challenging aspect of development?

Rodney Beach:

It'd be wiring in the native capability for the xAPI. I haven't done my research to say whether it's true anymore, but certainly up until last time, we did some deep dive research to see if anyone else is doing anything remotely similar, we couldn't find anyone that was doing anything in the world that could do the same functionality that tool does. I suppose a testament to the recognition that it's also received independently through the Stevie's award where last year, it was voted the best product in the world.

Michelle Ockers:

Which is an amazing accolade, Rod, incredible, and goes to the level of innovation involved in this. So if listeners haven't caught on yet, this is really innovative. You guys were really doing some cutting-edge stuff. And Siva, I know people can't see me smiling. I hope they can hear me smiling now and then on the podcast, but you said you really had to keep—I can't remember the exact word it was sort of like talking to Rod, encouraging him, bugging him, and you didn't give up.

So clearly, Rod, you knew there were going to be some challenges in this, but you built up the courage and just said, yep, we have to do this. Someone's got to do it, and we want to be the ones to do it. You were both feeling your way a little bit together with making this vision something real. How did you work together? What did that look like in terms of the kind of partnership that you need to make because clearly, you didn't have, Siva, this big statement of requirements with here's all the functionality and you hand that off and Rod builds that and comes back and says it's ready for testing. So how did you guys work together how did your teams work together?

Siva Kulasingam:

I think there's certainly that open and frank dialogue that we had together and giving that constant feedback around what we're looking for, the potential, the options, and more importantly also, the risk that comes along with it because there's no guarantees around what he's doing. And you could see some people addressing some aspects of trying to be mobile first, but yet, you could see the deficiencies in them as well. So there was never a perfect solution on the table, and it was something that needed to be crafted, and we had to work together to come up with it. So it was that feedback, and I think the big recognition to Rod is also the fact that he listened and took action and was willing to come back and actually do something.

But a lot of times, you provide the feedback and it's very rare that you see the action play out, and then for you to build on it and build on it. So it was that iterative process, I guess, over the years that got us to this point.

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Michelle Ockers:

Did you have a combined development team or was it more a case of, Rod, your team was developing and then passing things to see the feedback? Did you use Agile methodology? Just talk me through from a development perspective, Rod, how you set this up to be able to do this cutting-edge work?

Rodney Beach:

What made it really helpful is Siva's level of experience and understanding of digital learning, made it an awful lot easier. So we're able to go from zero to 100 really easily, really quickly, because he was able to articulate what he needed. It was an awesome solution. We're able to understand what he needed and why he needed it so we're able to take a good long run at it, but then it gets to that point where it's just the fine-tuning enhancements, new features, maybe some hiccups or something like that to be able to just continuously sort of in an agile way sort of enhance it, and I guess and that's where we're at the moment, enhancing it and like Siva, for example, may come up with some other fantastic idea, and it's like, yep, I hear what you're after, Siva. I have no idea how we're going to achieve that, but leave us with it, and we'll come back maybe in a week or two and take a look and see what you think.

So it would have been very difficult working with someone in that sort of partnership approach if they weren't very familiar with e-learning and requirements. And not just that, the deeper level of why. We just don't want to create some functionality, and we need to understand why and Siva was able to communicate a lot of those, so it made it an awful lot easier than it would have otherwise been.

Michelle Ockers:

So what did that briefing process look like? And assume, you've gone through a number of releases, so it sounds like you're still evolving. It sounds like Siva's is still pushing you, Rod. So as you start sort of shaping up, what's his first release going to look like? How does the briefing like take us through in a bit more nitty gritty? How did you work together? How did the briefing process work? How did you shape things up and provide things for review? Just take us through maybe one a sample of what one release process might have looked like.

Rodney Beach:

Yeah. Well, we covered off a fair bit in that release because Siva was able to give us a pretty detailed brief, and we understood what needed to be done. So we beavered away for a fair while to create something that was pretty solid and met most of the requirements of the brief, but then, from there, I suppose it starts to become fine-tuned and the more sort of intricate and granular and detailed some of the things that need to be put in there. Some were straightforward and we can grab like because it's built from the adapt framework, we can grab community plugins and drop them in relatively straightforward. But then some other things that aren't as straightforward and coding up some of the functionality from scratch, I guess. It really needs to be a little bit iterative, and we would have something and then send it over to Siva to say have a look. See whether you can break it or see with you've got so many any other ideas.

And Siva, because of his experience, if there was something there that was going to break or with the audience of 125,000 people, that would be the ones to find it was

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going to break. So it was a good opportunity to sort of fine-tune things collectively just to get them just right. And again, Siva is regularly coming up with new ideas, and they're great ideas and it just enhances the tool along with other people in the App-eLearn community coming up with ideas. We try and solicit ideas from other people and requests. We prioritize those and determine which ones we think are more viable than the others and jump into those.

Michelle Ockers:

So you're at a point now where you do have that kind of product development roadmap and a way of people putting in requests and assessing them. And, of course, testing things to break, that's whole point of testing them, right? You really want to push them hard and see if they will break and how they will break. Siva, how did you approach testing of each of these iterations when things were being passed over to you? What did you and your team do to test?

Siva Kulasingam:

Yeah. So I heavily relied obviously on my team to do the thorough testing and to make sure that—and we all got a very good capability to find ways to break things. And we do that for the right reasons because if we can break it, then so can any of our team members. So we obviously had to go through quite a bit of due diligence around that, and just pick up a whole range of things.

I think the other factor that I want to touch on quite briefly is also the point around building something like this whilst we are sort of juggling the day-to-day projects, and yet investing the time to develop a tool like this and get it to work the way we want it to work. The potential was always there, but balancing out I guess, what is going to be time and effort on Rod's end for customization versus what could fit the immediate need, and kind of striking the balance was always the constant negotiation we would have to then work out all right, this is something that's good enough I can live with for now, but we're going to come back and revisit it in a later date. So we always came to an agreement around what was good enough and not having to ensure that it was perfect. As long as it worked and it didn't break, that was good enough for me.

Michelle Ockers:

So you've mentioned risk in the conversation or around the concept of risk. For you, Siva, what were the biggest risks with going down this path, and how did you manage those for Coles and for yourself, I guess, as well because you're putting yourself out there, right? There's a level of personal credibility on the line here as well. So there's risk at multiple levels. What did you see is the biggest risks and how did you manage them?

Siva Kulasingam:

I think the risk for us was obviously starting something new is risky, right. And sometimes you just got to take a step back and go, if we didn't take this risk, then we're just going to be doing things the old way, and is that something that we're comfortable with? And if the answer is, no, then it is a worthwhile risk. But it's also a calculator risk, so obviously, there are some deal breakers for us, which is things should not impact our team members and team members learning experience because that's our ultimate goal. The moment that becomes in jeopardy, then

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straight away we know we're down the wrong path and we need to fix it and make sure it's working the way it needs to be.

Beyond that, it's really what are the things that we can enhance and go make it look better. What are the things that we can do to enhance it even further, and some of them may be classified as the nice to have, and to which then, I'll just have to be a bit more patient? So I guess that's kind of the risk mindset that we had to adopt to kind of work through this process, knowing that it's still going to be better each time we come back and revisit it.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. And how about for yourself, Rod? Well, there were obviously some—you've got a business to think about here. You're putting resource into it. You're making decisions. What were the risks for your organization in going down this path?

Rodney Beach:

Yeah. Well, the risks I suppose is the Liberate brand prides itself on custom learning and a team of designers and developers. On the onset with the development of App-eLearn, I guess anyone can create e-learning using that tool. They don't have to be designers and developers. So there was an immediate risk there. It was a total sort of loggerheads with the nature of our core business. It's almost like they sat on the opposite ends of the scale. One is a sort of high-end sort of custom learning design, and the other one is where anyone can just pick up the tool and design and develop it themselves. So to a degree, that cannibalised our core business.

So that was something that we just had to come to grips with of struggling with that and then how we're going to manage with that as well. At the end of the day would be like if we're not pushing ahead and doing this, someone else is going to do them we're going to be on the back foot. So but it was a bit of a struggle to sort of get our head around in terms of the conflict between the two services and platforms.

Michelle Ockers:

It's interesting, isn't it, because from the counter perspective, you could almost say well going down this path means it's pushing you on the content development side to be even better. Like if anyone can use this platform the way you win more business and keep growing as a business on the content development side isn't because you've got this great platform that no one else can access it's on the basis of the quality of the work you do around content development. So there's some benefit there. And if you think about content development, stick with that for the moment how is content developed for rollout on this platform, Siva? Do you do that in-house? Do you contract them out? What does that look like?

Siva Kulasingam:

So most of our content is predominantly done through our external partners. We don't really develop internally because of the time and effort it takes. What we do is we maintain all the source files. So what it does is it enables us to have control over updates and doing quick turnaround so that also means that we're not wasting our partners time around making small changes. It's a bit of a shift as well for some of our partners to work with us in that manner because some of them are not used to, and we had to address obviously some of their concerns around it.

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Michelle Ockers:

So in other words, some of your partners are more used to them holding on to the source files and them doing minor maintenance and so on rather than handing the source files over to you for maintenance?

Siva Kulasingam:

Absolutely. And that was also the start of the conversation that needed to happen was actually where is the most value created? If it's in the new projects and the development then absolutely that's where we want your time and effort spent. We don't want you to be wasting your time on small updates, and that's something that we can turn around pretty quickly. So that's what we really wanted to keep the focus on. And I guess the other thing issue that we had to address with our partners was also rightfully their concerns around IP, around their design and development. So that was something that we had to put in place as we were rolling out App-eLearn to ensure that we could maintain that, and there was a degree of confidence around that not being lost.

Michelle Ockers:

Do you find yourself doing a lot of education with your clients around the technology, the technical management, configuration management and so on? And if so, what are the key things you repeatedly are having to provide education around?

Rodney Beach:

A lot of people are asking for things they don't actually understand what it is. So like accessibility and double A, triple A single A through to xAPI through to SCORM and the versions, and they'll say some of the terminology because they've picked it up from somewhere but they don't actually understand what it is. So I think it's critical that people do understand the basics, especially if they've got it in their part of their requirements. What is it? And even with accessibility, for example, no point just saying it's got to be accessibility 2.1 double A. It's like what does that mean? And you want someone to build something into that standard, how are you going to test that? Do you actually understand what it is to be able to test it, otherwise, you'd have no idea what standard and how it's being constructed?

So I guess the biggest one at the moment especially with you App-eLearn on the market now as well is getting people to understand the difference. I guess if I use the traditional way of navigating, clicking next, and let's call that east to west, for example. And then we've got the responsive tools that are going to go north to south. Getting people to understand the difference between that mobile responsive, understand the difference between what adaptive is. You don't have to know how to do it but understand the concept of what a breakpoint is versus responsive and alike.

And from a scoping point of view, the look and the feel and the effort that goes into putting something that's east to west versus north to south is fairly significant. And some people swear by the modern contemporary north to south. And then others are more love the traditional east to west, and one of the outputs is totally different. The look and feel functionality is totally different, and the effort to create those are totally different. So then, it's important to understand some of those fundamentals.

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Michelle Ockers:

So how do you go about learning about those fundamentals? We've probably got some people listening to this going oh my goodness, my head is spinning. See but you've obviously/ you've built up your knowledge, and at some point, you didn't have that knowledge. Obviously, you're at an advanced level now, and you're keeping abreast of change. But for either one of you, what advice do you have for people who are listening, and particularly, for L&D professionals in organizations who are keen to really do better with their digital learning, but they're listening to all this jargon, and they're like I don't know where to start. How do they get across the fundamentals, so they can have intelligent informed conversations with people like Rod and other vendors to engage effectively with them?

Siva Kulasingam:

That's a great question. I think well to be honest; I still feel I'm still learning that's the most interesting bit and I'm not a technical person myself. However, I am passionate about ensuring that we deliver the right outcome for our people, for our team members and what is a good learning experience. It also kind of starts from there and then trying to understand what are the constructs of it, and what are the technical aspects to it. It's sort of the way you start breaking it down. And a lot of times, I just have to ask the question. I just have to go, well, what does that mean, how does that work, and how does that play out and what's the risk involved?

Michelle Ockers:

Who do you ask and where do you go?

Siva Kulasingam:

I'll be asking the likes of Rod every single time. So what does this mean, and will I get into trouble if I went down this path, or do you think it's less risky? So a lot of the learnings were just based out of curiosity and understanding how things work, not necessarily knowing—looking under the hood, but not necessarily having to fix it. And so by asking these questions and coming back to that earlier point around risk and managing the risk and playing that out in your mind as well helps you kind of strike a balance between what is good enough, and to know how you can make sensible decisions and know what the trade-offs are.

So a lot of the technical things might sound overwhelming, but you just need to get the general concept of it. And it's just like you learn anything new. It's finding something that you can relate to. Like how Rod use good analogies around the LMS or a player. It's finding those things that you can relate to that then just takes away some of that technical jargon around it.

Michelle Ockers:

So Rod, where would you recommend people start? Do they just get online and start doing internet searching? Are there particular resources you'd recommend or people they should follow? Where does someone start?

Rodney Beach:

I think it's a matter of finding someone within your network that you trust and that doesn't just talk the talk, that walks the walk as well. And I when I say that I mean someone that just doesn't throw buzzwords at you that you may hear at a

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conference, and their level of knowledge and understanding of that is very surface level. So if they can't explain even some of the most complex concepts with digital learning, if they can't explain it easily for you to understand, then it's probably because they don't know it themselves, and they're just throwing some buzzwords out there.

Michelle Ockers:

So Rod, let me check in on something every time you say App-eLearn, I think I'm mispronouncing it because it sounds like Happy Learn when you say it. It's really lovely but it's actually can you spell it out for us and educate us on the correct pronunciation.

Rodney Beach:

Yeah, it does sound like a Happy Learn, but yeah, it's I guess the functionality in the outputs, I guess was a hybrid between a traditional e-learn versus sort of an app, sort of a web feel. So that's where the name come from. So yeah, it's App-eLearn, so yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

App-eLearn.

Rodney Beach:

App-eLearn.

Michelle Ockers:

All right. Well, it'll bring a smile to my face every time I hear it. So speaking of bringing a smile to your face, there's a nice story about what you did with App-eLearn during COVID, Rod. Would you like to share that with the listeners?

Rodney Beach:

Yeah, a lot of people were struggling. A lot of people were locked down. A lot of people had time on their hands. There was a lot of industry experts like baristas and hairdressers and builders or whatever industry it might have been that we're locked down and not able to operate, but they were subject matter experts. So we've found ourselves a unique opportunity to be able to let those people use App-eLearn to build some online training, so they could—let's say if it was a barista, it could be like how to make an excellent latte all the difference between a mocha and a latte in a chai or whatever it might be. So they could create some training.

A lot of retailers for example could jump on and create some products running for their staff or for customers, and then offer that. You can publish it to use a tech term HTML sort of standalone that essentially would be like a website. So you could use it to build like a website or you could publish it to run on a learning record store or a learning management system from a tracking reporting point of view. So they could create those assets themselves. And we decided to let anyone in Australia use it. Well, we just said anyone can use it but we didn't actually think about the international interest that this would have, and then we started to get some people overseas wanting to access the tool.

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And then, I suppose, we sort of have to think well actually we need to be a bit more considered about this. Is there any reason we should be only limited in this to people in Australia? So in the end we decided especially with a global pandemic and people needing to pivot, go online especially in a learning context, we decided to say, you know what? Let's just let anyone use it no matter where they are in the world, and hence we've done that. We did pick up another I'm not sure whether it was global or Asia-Pacific award for the best COVID response sort of product solution as well. So we've offered that at the start of the COVID, and at the moment, we're still letting people use the base version for free at this point in time which is two years since now.

Michelle Ockers:

It's a very generous and helpful thing that you did. So well done on making that contribution at a time when I'm sure it meant a lot to a lot of people.

So if you reflect both of you over the past two, three years and the journey you've taken together with App-eLearn and with using it to realize this stretch vision for digital learning at Coles, what would you say for each of you was the key challenge or challenges, and what was the key to addressing that?

Rodney Beach:

The key challenges were we need to create something that's robust, that's easy to use that meets all the standard industry requirements, but then also future proofing and future planning as much as possible, and that links back to a lot of Siva's vision and requirements. Even now, a number of people in the App-eLearn user community, but particularly Siva, always pushing the boundaries in terms of here's another idea, here's a concept, here's a theme, or here's some functionality that we want to put in there. Can it do it? Sometimes, the answer is yes but more often or not, it's like I haven't even thought of it. No one's ever asked for it, but it's a fantastic idea. Let's have a go.

Michelle Ockers:

And Siva, from your perspective what have been sort of the key challenge or challenges and how do you feel that's been addressed?

Siva Kulasingam:

I think for me, the challenges were just recognizing where the industry is at and what we have available to us in terms of tools. I talked previously about the platforms that we have in terms of LMS. I feel that needs a bit of a shakeup in terms of the way it works. Even with our partners as well that we've used in the past, the way they go about operating and the way they charge in terms of the model, like that needs a bit of a change. So I kind of feel we're at this funny kind of crossroad where everything digitally that with the way we interact with the world is changing, but yet the learning industry itself from a tech point of view hasn't really shifted yet, and I think that's where we are starting to ask those questions and trying to align those experiences only to find that perhaps, we're still a little bit behind.

And so I think that's where I sometimes can get a bit frustrated, and that's why I sometimes find these challenges. And that's when I go to Rod and say, what can we do here? Why can we not do that, or do you think it's something worthwhile

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investing? And it just starts with that conversation. I think the great thing is just both of us have this shared interest of trying to raise the bar, right, and it comes with risk and it doesn't matter we'll make mistakes along the way, and we're quite comfortable with that. But it's wanting to raise the bar is probably the key thing that we feel we want to aim for.

Michelle Ockers:

I think for me, there's a few themes that have really stood out from the conversation and one is kind of the technology side of the story. The other is the partnership and something you've just touched on there, Siva, which is probably something for a longer conversation at another time which is about the industry operating models, and this is an example of potentially drawing out some lessons from this around what that operating model might look like, and right to your point around well, this is more about going open source and everything not being proprietary, other people being able to build on the platform you've invested in as well, and what does that mean and shifting the operating model somewhat. And does either of you have any commentary or a vision for what you'd most like to see different about the industry operating model?

Siva Kulasingam:

Oh, there's a lot. But in order for this sort of change and shake up to happen, we have to be prepared to let go of certain things. We have to be prepared to challenge ourselves and to be bold. Like to Rod's point earlier, he ran the risk of cannibalizing one part of his business for another. But if that means we raise the bar, then it's certainly worth an investment. If it means then people are going to come along on that journey, then I think it's certainly worth that investment.

Not many people are prepared to do that. I think that's a risky thing because there are commercial realities that they have to stick to, and I completely appreciate that. But if there is an opportunity, if you do find the time to do it, then I'll say invest in it. Try to find a way to innovate because most of the time, you'll find that the problems that you have be it at an organizational level, it's for your employee or even for your own team as a learning function, it's something that's shared across the board.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. And Rod, do you have any comments about the industry operating model, and how you see it shifting and how maybe you think it needs to continue to change?

Rodney Beach:

Yeah, it's ironic because talking about it now anchors me back to when I started Liberate 11 years ago and the name Liberate comes from trying to liberate from all these self-serving type solutions, products and hooks that get people in where they a bit like the wedding photographers; not sharing the negatives and destroying the ones that you don't want. No one likes that, and there's not a way to build friends. It's not a way to build relationships.

Michelle Ockers:

You've given us a nice example between the two of you of what good looks like moving forward, and what it looks like to think beyond just your own interests and think about the bigger good. So lots of respect to both of you. I really wasn't aware of

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this body of work. I was aware of both of your organizations but not of what you had done together and the symbiotic relationship between you. So I really value you coming and talking to us about it. It's a great model for others to look at and think about how can we push ourselves even further.

So let's close up with some tips for others who may be thinking about how to do more with learning innovation particularly around digital learning. What are the key tip or tips that each you would have for others who want to do more with learning innovation?

Siva Kulasingam:

I think there's several aspects to that. It's a very broad question. Where do I start? There are times where you need to meet your learners in terms of where they're at. They're also really important to understand what are your barriers for learning. And that could be in the form of technology, it could be the form of leadership it could be in several forms. So I think recognizing all of that and knowing yet, there's still a place for you to play a role with innovation is really important.

And sometimes, it just as the saying goes, a problem shared is a problem half. And sometimes, just doing that means you actually are going to find people who might have the same problem or you might know someone else who can help you out with. So I think reaching out to a network is equally important in terms of being able to address some of these pain points.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you. And Rod, anything you'd like to add in terms of tips for others who'd like to do more with learning innovation?

Rodney Beach:

Yeah, you're always thinking outside of the box. And thinking inside that box and the cookie cutter type approach, and it's very comfortable and safe, but you can't innovate. You can't learn. You can't test and learn and experiment. You can't push the boundaries and innovate if you just sit in that box and don't look outside, and don't experiment, and finding other people other team members and other stakeholders like Siva's that's willing to push you is another key value because we like to think—I use that phrase, we've built our reputation by helping others build theirs, but at the same time, there's people like Siva, for example, that are pushing us to innovate and sharing their ideas. We just need to be bold to make sure we listen and have a go, and not feel to settle in a safe box.

Michelle Ockers:

So listeners, what a great start to 2022 for our first case study off the back of—and this was not set up with Siva and Rod. They weren't aware of this—of the back of our special Emergent series which was all about core strengths for taking bold action in L&D. So I think this is a really great example of that kind of courage and boldness in action. So thank you so much Siva and Rod for joining us to share this story. We'll share links to your LinkedIn profiles, and certainly Rod, a link to the Liberate and App-eLearn sites if people are interested in following up and finding out more about anything we've discussed today. Thank you both so much for being our first case study guest for 2022.

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Siva Kulasingam:

Pleasure. Thank you.

Rodney Beach:

My pleasure. Thank you for your time.



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*



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