

Learning Uncut Episode 97
Leadership Development in Covid Times – Peta Pocock
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

My guest on this Learning Uncut episode is Peta Pocock, who's the Director of National People Development at the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Yes, a data rich environment, which makes for one perspective that we explore in this interesting episode, which really tells the story of how leadership development changed at the Australian Bureau of Statistics, as a result of the shift in environment because of COVID and the move to remote working. Not only did people's interest in leadership and their development needs change as a result of having to adapt to remote working, but it also gave Peta and her team the opportunity to be more innovative. It's a great story of the type of Learning and Development team who perhaps had wanted to innovate, who'd wanted to adopt more contemporary higher impact approaches, but had faced a lot of resistance in their organization with more traditional perspectives in terms of what people expected training to look like as opposed to learning and development. And when that door was open just a little bit as a result of COVID and the move to remote working, Peta and her team were one of those Learning and Development teams who just leaned into that push the door open and use that as an opportunity to make some substantial shifts in leadership development in the organization. As a result, over time, over the past two years, Peta's team has developed much deeper business influence and impact. So please listen to this story as an excellent example of some of the very best of the shifts that have been made over the past two years as a result of changes in the world of work.

It's also interesting from the perspective that Peta works in a data rich environment, the Bureau of Statistics, of course, data is at the heart of their work. And that raises some interesting opportunities. We have a great conversation around the way Peta uses data and works at both ends of the learning and development spectrum from the learning value end to the business value end with data to engage the business and to make an impact with the work they do. Please enjoy this conversation. I got a lot out of it, and I'm sure you will too.

Michelle Ockers:

Hello, Peta. Welcome to Learning Uncut.

Peta Pocock:

Thank you so much. Great to be here, Michelle.

Michelle Ockers:

It's lovely to have you here. I'm very excited about the fact we have a great story from the government sector. I don't get a lot of government stories. This may be the first government sector story and we're up to episode 96.

Peta Pocock:

Awesome. Good to see that government's finally represented. I'm glad to be here.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. And congratulations on making it into the finalist for two categories, in last year's Australian Institute of Training and Development Excellence Awards, Blended Learning, and best capability

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building both really hotly contested. So well done on that.

Peta Pocock:

Thank you, Michelle. Absolutely thrilled. Can't be more happy. Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

And just as an aside, because I think the whole idea of going for awards, sometimes people don't, and it's a great way for us to share our work, to make our work more visible. And for us, I think to critically review our work to tell a story about the work as well, what, and I know I don't see a lot of government departments putting up for awards. So why did you decide to nominate for an award?

Peta Pocock:

Yeah, absolutely. It's such a valid point. This is the first time the Australian Bureau of Statistics where I work had actually put up for this award. And it's just it was a matter of an active AITD member our mixed private sector. So I'm very aware of how important the awards are and everyone has a go and we thought, why not. Add to that, I've got a phenomenal team member, Nikki, who is a wonderful writer. And she just decided to take on the project and put the submission together. So the reason was I was aware of it. There's the extra obstacles with government with approvals for things like this, but it was a matter of why not, and you've got to be in it to win it. And I had a fantastic writer who put a great submission together that we all then edited. And it was just a matter of why not. And obviously it's worked because we got to the finalist category, didn't win, but I'm happy to take silver.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. And for listeners, my Emerging Stronger colleague, Laura Overton wrote a great post on LinkedIn, an article on LinkedIn about the value of nominating for awards. So I'll put a link to that. So if you're hovering and thinking, "Should I or shouldn't I?" You absolutely should because it's not about whether you win or lose the award, but you get so much out of the process of doing your thinking around putting up for an award or even when you I think there's something too, because impact is really important. If you're thinking about at the start of an initiative, if we were to frame this in a way that it was award worthy, what might it look like? I think people would spend a little bit more time thinking about how we're going to demonstrate impact on what does impact really look like.

Peta Pocock:

Oh, that is absolutely because whilst the submission, there's lots of aspects to it. You've only got so many words to try and prove what you've done and why, and it's just that idea of looking backwards. So when you are writing it, where do we want to be with program as opposed to anything else. And then to that point, I think a lot of us in L&D where we're the quiet workers in the background often, and we're there to help performance of the organization. And there's nothing wrong with actually putting your hand up and saying, "Actually, we're really proud of this work that we've done." And also our community shares. So it's the idea of, "If I've put myself up and then someone has a question about what we've done, then they can share and utilize what we've done and perhaps embed that in their organization." So there's so many positives that come from it.

Michelle Ockers:

There are. So let's talk about the Australian Bureau of Statistics and the work you've done around leadership development, leadership development in the COVID era. And I think it's a really interesting story with that context and how you've taken advantage of that context as well. So tell us a bit about the Australian Bureau of Statistics.

Peta Pocock:

So ABS, everybody knows Australian Bureau of Statistics for the census, but we actually do a lot more than that, but absolutely on statistics. So it's about collecting data that assists and informs government decisions. So when we look at any statistics out there in the public eye that you read in the paper or see on the news about whether it's impacts interest rates, unemployment rates, labor market rates, it all comes from ABS. So from a workforce we've got about 3000 staff across all states

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and territories in the country. So we're a national organization, federal government, we're a bureau. So we're a little bit different to the typical government department. And that we're very independent in what we do an amazing group of people, very educated, very intelligent workforce. I joke around that there's lots of PhDs within the organization, probably more PhDs than bachelors.

If that gives you an idea, so educated alert really want to help make a difference to the Australian community. So it's a passionate workforce that a very technically astute. So from a leadership perspective, it's a massive opportunity for me. So it's that typical situation where someone's excelling in what they do and then they get promoted. And because they're already quite intelligent or very intelligent, know what they're on about. It's just a matter of our division being able to give them that extra resources to help them increase in their leadership capacity. So it's really drawing on their technical ability and pushing it further in the leadership and management space, if that makes sense.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. What are most typically the areas or aspects where that they most need development given they're coming from a very technical background?

Peta Pocock:

Yeah, look, absolutely everything from, we do quite a lot with basic emerging leaders, developing leaders, senior leadership, sort of leadership 101, but at the same time also psychometric. So EQI, we utilize whether it's Myers-Briggs or HBDI to give that self-awareness and for the leader to start thinking about themselves and the communication skills that they portray, everything from listening, empathy, all of those, what we used to call soft skills. And that term kills me. We call it core skills at ABS. So we have technical and core skills. And so it's really building on that, how to be an effective human adaptive leader and looking at it from the basics of leadership and basics of management right through to how you can be that strong willed, but empathetic leader.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Yeah. I think power skills is another term I sometimes hear future skills it's kind of, I personally, I really like power skills and I wish that language would get picked up.

Peta Pocock:

I'm stealing it.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, great. Let's spread the word. So very educated workforce. In what ways does the level of education and the very technical mind of the leaders be they new or more senior leaders, more experienced leaders, in what way does that shape how you approach leadership development with them?

Peta Pocock:

Yeah, a little bit different Michelle. I think the content is the same. So if we're talking about leadership and the basic terms that are out there, whether it's storming forming and things as such that doesn't change, it's perhaps the mode and the method of delivery that needs to change. So it's the idea that particular workforce are actually fantastic with pre-work for example. So we don't need to start whilst you need to. I talk about learning and leadership up is building blocks. The basic building blocks our audience and our staff are willing to come to any kind of learning activity already having done stage

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one.

Michelle Ockers:

What a dream.

Peta Pocock:

I know.

Michelle Ockers:

People out there listening now going, "Oh, I wish I could rely on people to do the pre-work."

Peta Pocock:

Which is amazing. But also that means that we need to absolutely be ready to go from a learning perspective the minute they engage with us in any of our formats. So it's not starting at that bare minimum, it's assuming and having complete confidence that pre-work aspect is done. So if we say come to this masterclass on ABC theory, I could almost bet you that 90% of attendees have already Googled what that ABC theory is. And they've gone looked into it and watched a YouTube video. So they're not coming in hearing about it for the first time.

Michelle Ockers:

So even independently of you feeding them the resources that go out into research and prime themselves.

Peta Pocock:

Absolutely. Absolutely. It's phenomenal. So it's an absolute blessing, but on the flip side, it means we absolutely need to be on our game.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. But that's great. Because you can work with the experience in the group, you can do more of the peer to peer stuff. You can do more of the application-

Peta Pocock:

Absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

... right from the get go, which is fantastic.

Peta Pocock:

Exactly. Less about teaching the theory of leadership and more about the practical aspect. How can we learn from this, embed this and share it with each other.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So tell us a little about your learning and development team then Peta.

Peta Pocock:

Phenomenal group, I've got about 24 now across four states across Australia. So how it works, I've got five direct reports and then the learning team report to them. We kind of, I'd say loosely, there's three streams within the team. So there's a stream that looks after core... Excuse me, core and operation support. So it's really the team that does a lot of the instructional design and the system supports a learning management systems. And that's an added bonus I'll say for them being that we're navigating interesting government systems and trying to bring external cloud based systems into ABS is always a challenge. So that team trying to integrate things like using storyline, for

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example, or LMS is always an extra challenge.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. I think anyone who hasn't had exposure to working with government L&D teams can't truly appreciate how diabolical the IT side of things is and getting things to work in your IT environment.

Peta Pocock:

Yeah. Absolutely. And look, our IT team are amazing at ABS just to let everyone know, obviously we're dealing with extremely sensitive and confidential statistics. So anything that comes into our IT environment absolutely has to go through 101 hurdles is probably the best way to make sure our data's protected. And of course from the L&D perspective I'm thinking, "It's just an LMS, what's so sensitive about that?" But of course it all adds to the technical infrastructure.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So you've got the core and ops support team?

Peta Pocock:

That's right. Yeah. I've got my data came capability team, so they're our technical arm. So being that loosely three quarters of the agency are all very much data statistical focused in their actual role. So they focus on the very detailed technical side of things. So getting people to where they need to be with some very, I say fancy because most of it's over my head, fancy data and statistical terms and train on tools and so forth. And then of course our leadership team, which centered on these AIT nominations, which look after management 101, if you will leadership our graduate development program. So at ABS for example, we've taken on 98 graduates this year alone. So I think a lot of private-

Michelle Ockers:

It's an impressive number out of a workforce of 3000.

Peta Pocock:

Oh, tell me about it, Michelle. So I think this has been, being ex private sector, a bit of a shock to me. It's a good shock. It's a massive, massive group. I know with private sectors you're lucky if you take maybe 10 grads a year. So it's very much the graduate talent pipeline is absolutely the future of ABS. There's a big focus on data within those grads. So it's preparing them to be data experts, but also leads to the future. It's a big part of work that comes under that area.

Michelle Ockers:

Fantastic. And you joined the ABS, I think from a state government role eHealth New South Wales. And you mentioned you've had private sector experience as well. You joined in May 2019.

Peta Pocock:

That's right.

Michelle Ockers:

What's... So about nine months before COVID hit. And we went into that first big lockdown. Which we're going to talk about in a little while what that meant, but when you cast your mind back to first joining the ABS, when we think about leadership development, what stood out for you about learning and leadership development in the ABS when you joined?

Peta Pocock:

Yeah, absolutely. Look, I'll be completely transparent. And as I said, I love ABS, but leadership is seen or at the time was seen as something on the side. So it's about ABS is very much statistics and data and that's absolutely our core business. And I lead teams as part of that. And that was perhaps the view. And that was absolutely made sense for where the organization was. And at that point we'd introduced flex working, but most leaders had maybe staff across one or

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two sites, not the whole organization in multiple time zones and so forth.

So that was probably the view it was done, but it was done on the side as opposed to someone wanting to be a strong leader and leading through their people. And ideally having assistant directors, for example, that were more of the technical focus. That was the everyday ABS. Our senior executive service, which is about 50 of the 3000 were quite different, obviously. So they were absolutely focused on senior leadership and what they could do to really bring their group along. So leadership was seniors, their core business. So it was just that shift in the majority of the staff leadership was on the side versus our top leaders it was absolutely their day-to-day bread and butter. So two distinct cohorts.

Michelle Ockers:

Right. That's interesting. And in terms of leadership development, is there anything you'd like to add around what that meant for leadership development pre-COVID?

Peta Pocock:

Yeah. Look what it meant, pre-COVID is we had old school learning and development. We had manager fundamentals or leadership 101 courses where our trainers in my team would jump on planes and fly around the country and do one or two day. I like to call event training. Which is we turn up, we have a fantastic day and we absolutely learn something. But at the end of the day, we sign off our happy sheets and whether anything's applied to the workforces is questionable just because it was that old school learning. So don't get me wrong ABS absolutely the staff were interested in that training. They attended it, they did their work beforehand, but it was very much turn up experience the event on the day or the conference, for example, and go back to the workplace we had, there was no way I was able to do anything remote. It was definitely not something that was seen to be of interest. Let's put it that way. So it was definitely back to classroom style learning.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. And then 2020 arrived. So talk to me about what COVID meant for leadership development at the agency, both the challenges and the opportunities.

Peta Pocock:

Okay. I'll start with opportunities because glass half full. I probably shouldn't say this, but COVID from me and from a learning and development perspective has been a blessing. COVID itself absolutely hasn't I've experienced it. I'm not saying anything about the health side of it, but from an L&D opportunity perspective. So what it meant is our entire workforce practically overnight went remote, had to work from home. As I mentioned before, we already had that at the ABS. So we're actually in a really good position for a federal government agency. A lot of them hadn't done working from home at all. So we had the tech and the infrastructure set up. It was about the leaderships being prepared to get staff through that as well as making sure the staff were feeling supported. So it was a massive opportunity to go virtual overnight. I distinctly remembered when COVID first hit.

We were about to launch our grad development program in 2020. So I think it was about 78 staff that were all due to turn up to Canberra on the Monday. And we had to cancel it all on the Friday and literally had a weekend to turn a fully in-person program remote. So the opportunities was definitely being able to take things remote, opportunities was dare I say, I think a lot more people were knocking on L&D's door. So I know how to manage my team, but this is different. How do I manage my team when I've got a reduced footprint when I've got lots of working moms and dads that are looking after children that were on work, doing school from home and so forth. So massive opportunities for us that they were knocking on our door asking beyond just the stereotypical leadership style.

And while the AITD awards are about leading in COVID times, part of that was also resilience training and also adding, having seminars about our EAP program, for example. So a lot more areas and subject matter that we hadn't previously covered became of higher priority we'll say. Challenges, obviously tech very quickly. So as I mentioned, we've got great infrastructure at ABS and we use Skype for business internally, but it was all of us in L&D no, it's probably not the best tool for actual

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virtual live online training. So jumping through, I feel like a thousand hoops, we managed to get Zoom licenses with permission because we weren't sharing any ABS sensitive data whatsoever. And we had to operate that outside of our normal tech environment. So we could send invites by our learning management system, but had to get stuck to log out of ABS systems and use external platforms for example, to attend learning.

So lots of obstacles there, and then obviously the cultural shift to get people online. So as I said it was a massive plus for us. We could see the opportunities, but of course, practically overnight, we had to get our ABS staff to see it as an opportunity and embrace online learning. I haven't got the statistics behind me, which sounds bad from ABS, but we do have a higher proportion than I've experienced normally of introverted staff, for example, and joining live online experience where you've actually got to turn your camera on was a challenge to a lot of our staff in the early days, let alone sharing openly where everybody can see what you're doing. It's a bit easier to be that quieter person in a classroom. And then sitting up the back for example, then it can sometimes be a little bit more confronting in the early days for a Zoom classroom. I'm sure there's a lot more opportunities and challenges, but that's what's coming to mind.

Michelle Ockers:

I think they're the key ones. And I think when people listen to this, let's say you're listening in 10 years, time to this, and you want to brush up on what was COVID really like for L&D and how did those teams that leaned into it as an opportunity in terms of maybe I've had cultural resistance before to doing things differently. Now the door is opened and people are coming to me saying, "Oh, we have to do things differently." I think this will come across as an archetypal story of how the better teams took advantage of that opening up.

Peta Pocock:

Absolutely. Michelle, even now, what two years in I'm shaking my head at the situation we had and how it's just business as usual. Now it's the way we do things. Our staff are embracing it. We've got wait lists for different master classes. It's so different. So yeah, in 10 years' time, it's probably like listening to back in my day, we used to record songs from the radio on cassettes it's that kind of thing. I'm sure.

Michelle Ockers:

I wish I was young enough to say I never did that, but anyway.

Peta Pocock:

You get me?

Michelle Ockers:

I do. So let's talk about today then. So put us in the shoes of one of your leads today. Let's say I'm a new leader in the ABS, first time in a leadership role. Can you walk me through my development pathway and experience? What could I expect as a new leader now?

Peta Pocock:

Absolutely. I think things are so different. So the term I've been using and it's stuck is we are doing choose your own adventure leadership. And really we sat down with the team and we talked through different ideas and thought about that, we do have a diverse workforce. Do we really want to do an emerging introduction leader versus a refresher versus advance? And we thought, "Why don't we just build it all as if you're building a language course with beginning intermediate advance or perhaps a university course that has your core subjects in year one and then your electives." So really what we've got is that core as you come in, which involves our essential learning. So it used to be called mandatory learning as part of all of this, we reframed and rephrased it to essential learning and it's

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got a much nicer ring to it.

Michelle Ockers:

Oh, that's so nice. Our language sends so many messages, right?

Peta Pocock:

Oh, absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

I like essentials rather than mandatory.

Peta Pocock:

Oh absolutely. Myself too. And dare to say we've reamed that and people have absolutely embraced it. So our normal essential suite, which makes sure that we are covering any legislative or audit requirements and that's from your basics of WHS, managing your team, financial delegations, et cetera. And that hasn't changed too much. So that's always been a need learning side of things. But on top of that, the next is what we sort of talk about the good manager program. And this is a multifaceted program and this was part of our AITD submission. So included in that is a series of courses. And so it could be courses such as manager 101. So that's the basics of things like making sure your staff don't have excessive annual leave, flex sheets are taken care of, their probations are done correctly and so forth. And then there's things like resilience and wellbeing, which is all about looking after yourself as a leader and that agile analogy of on a plane, the parent puts their oxygen mask on first. So it's that idea, but also for different staff members, and then that builds. So in those different courses, there's one hour master classes, which are nice, short, sharp, sweet, two-way communications with the facilitator and a small group of up to 20 where they really go through the different courseware that as I mentioned before, they've probably read already with all the different supporting resources and discuss the ideas and the implications of those ideas. So how can I take this knowledge and embed it into the workplace and the masterclass is build on each other. So often someone's attended masterclass A and then they come to B or C and reflect on the learning from the different masterclasses. So it's just a constantly evolving door.

Michelle Ockers:

So the masterclasses run like there's a schedule of masterclasses, and anyone can opt to join a masterclass on a topic at any time. They just need to look the schedule and book in for whichever one interests them.

Peta Pocock:

Spot on and all different times and days. Because we've got a large portion of flex workers at ABS. We've also got our lovely colleagues in WA so the three hour time difference. So all different times. And whilst we talk about this as managers, we actually pitched it as open to anybody. And what's really been interesting and I had a look at the stats. 19% of our attendance in masterclasses to dates has been of non-supervisor levels. So staff that are either preparing for the next level, or maybe just want to sticky beak to what managers are learning. So that's been really great. We've really opened it. Anybody can join whether it's at the entry level or right up at the senior executive level. And then on top of that as a leader so we've got the masterclasses on all different topics and revolving, and that's done all live online.

There was definitely in the early days people were saying, "Well, can you record them?" And we actually made a decision. No, we wanted it to be a live rich online experience where they were sharing as we go. So it wasn't passive. We've got other passive options if people want to take that in. So for example, we also have a seminar series that's called Leading Working and Thriving that in times of COVID we were hosting those once fortnightly. So it was a live webcast that went out for anyone to join in at ABS, as I mentioned, we've got great tech infrastructure, so people could join in. And it was just really the L&D staff and our friends from other areas of the business in particular our people management and wellbeing section would basically high host a live lecture if you will, for lack a better word, but we did have live poll live interaction. So people could attend and ask questions.

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And then an MC in the room would then ask the facilitators, the questions from the audience. So it was a chance to take it in. They were recorded. You could watch it on demand, but it was also that way to taking the content as opposed to that really interactive learning experience.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. I think I really want to flag that signal. That point you've just made there about being very deliberate in when you do and don't record. I think that's really critical just because you can, doesn't mean you should.

Peta Pocock:

You should 100%.

Michelle Ockers:

I'm going to attribute that quote to Cheryle Walker. I did an episode with her last year, an elevate episode about live online learning and she's put together a fabulous book on that topic. So I'll put that in the show notes as well. If anyone wants to have a think about how they might lift their game on the live online learning to make it really impactful.

Peta Pocock:

Michelle. Absolutely. And I'll attribute it Cheryle as well. So you would've heard me talk about live online. I'm sure we'll probably talk about it later, but how did I get my team ready to do that? We enrolled an AITD course that was about live online learning and Cheryle was our facilitator and phenomenal. I can't thank her enough.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, she's fabulous.

Peta Pocock:

And she gave my team confidence.

Michelle Ockers:

I did some of her courses early in COVID as well.

Peta Pocock:

She's brilliant. Absolutely. And then that absolutely was in instrumental way that we make that shift.

Michelle Ockers:

Great. Big shout out to Cheryle.

Peta Pocock:

Absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So you've talked about, so there is content people consume, there's courses you've got the short masterclasses. Are there any other kind of types of experiences to support my development?

Peta Pocock:

Yeah, absolutely. So we had the, which is still going the manager 101, it's a weekly blog series. And it's posted on our online community that we have at ABS it's an opt-in. So we did a lot of promotions and communications earlier. It's just by size chunk learning. So each week an article for lack of better words will come through, which is curated by my team, which included quizzes, short five to 10 minute quizzes that people could then respond and give their answers to. And then the following week, the new blog would come out with answers from the last week. Kind of like a take on your old school

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crossword that's in the Sydney Morning Herald each week.

Michelle Ockers:

That's not so old school. I do the newspaper quiz. I FaceTime with my mother in the evenings and do the newspaper quiz.

Peta Pocock:

Love it. See sometimes that they live for a reason. So that was a great way to interact again. And then probably finally we put together a manager hub, which I like to call a one-stop shop, which was just the idea that like most organizations, we have so much information on leadership and management, but it was everywhere. So let's try and find an easy way that people can open the door to Woolworths and pick the food that they want. So we put together a manager hub, which really was just a link to everything else, but it included anything you can possibly think of on the topic of leadership and management and links to whether it's knowledge, documents, or systems. But it was the idea if we can draw people to the one spot, I could pretty much say with certainty 99% of what they need in that space was all there at their fingertips. And again, so the idea was a really blended, supportive environment with all different mediums, depending on what people needed and how they learned best.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Did you think about a third party content platform? Because there's lots of third party content platforms out there that have heaps of existing content around management and leadership. Did you look at that as an option? And if so, why did you decide to go with an in-house curated?

Peta Pocock:

Yeah, absolutely. So the short answer is budget, for anyone listening that works in government and dare I say, private sector, L&D tends to get cut first unfortunately, but just the budget wasn't there to look at external vendors add to that time was of the essence. So COVID hit us and hit us fast. I outlined before in a non-tech way that our infrastructure with technology is fantastic, but it's very difficult to get through. So being able to go to market to have money, to actually get a third party vendor or who are all fantastic, but then to get them into our ABS environment was just going to take too long. So it was a matter of what can we make internally? What can we beg, borrow and steal to make this happen? And does it look as fancy as those wonderful third party vendors? No, but does it absolutely serve its purpose and did it at the time? Absolutely. So if I had more time and money, I absolutely would've done that, but it was a matter of what can we do internally that absolutely meets the needs of our staff.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So I talk with a lot of different L&D teams who want to do something similar in terms of let's provide somewhere on our intranet on SharePoint or Teams or whatever it is they're using, where people can go and do the curation. It's not for the fainthearted, it's actually a fair bit of effort. And you need to really think about it. I'd like to say you need to get your information architecture right. You need to understand how people going to search for things. What search terms are they going to use? Where are they going to go? How might you tag and structure information? So what did you find? How did you get that stuff, right?

Peta Pocock:

Yeah. So look, absolutely what you've mentioned. And that was just to highlight, it was a hard and fast solution, but all those things is what we had to go through. So it was a matter of dividing up the team. So there was the team that worked on the infrastructure or what the place would look like, where it would go, what it would look like. And that was our core and operations team. I mentioned before versus the leadership team went looking for content. So it was a bit of a divide and conquer type of approach. So one team at the same time was looking for what could we put on it and talking to all different areas of the business and testing that out and doing a bit of user testing very quickly and

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rapidly defined. We also tied into other areas of HR.

So we'd been doing pulse surveys and wellbeing. So we knew what the hot topics were. So we knew what was important from an order of things. And the core team then worked with our tech team to be able to say, "Well, what have we got in our existing infrastructure that we could actually use for this?" And then we also engage people like our comms team that are great graphic designers and got them and talk them into helping us out and putting together some beautiful graphics that really helped. So that was visually appealing. And in essence, all it is a page that has different tiles with pictures. And then from there, the core operations team worked on definitely to your point, the references, the tags, as I mentioned, it was basically just a one-stop shop with links to everything else. So the minute those links changed that also became an ongoing drama that we had to maintain, but it was a way of rapidly putting up some content that most of the time, if a staff member went to look out, I don't know, let's say industrial relations. And they clicked onto that tile. The information was there. So it was very much in the early days about a quick divide and conquer. And now it's very much a BAU aspect of our core operations team who support it making sure that it's adequate. And as with all of our channels, there's always feedback loops. And we've got an email and basically an area online that people can leave their feedback. And so it was definitely an evolving space as, as this entire leadership response to COVID has been evolving based on people have said, "Have you thought of how about," and that's how the content's evolved.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So I'm resisting asking more questions about data. I do want to come back to it because you are living in a data your whole context is yes, it's a data world. So I'm really curious about that. But before we get to that, talk to us about how the team developed and implemented the solution. Because it's like, I know you said it's still evolving, but it's really took mature. There's a lot of components to it. You've got this, "Oh, all of a sudden we can't do face-to-face." So I imagine there were stages that you went through in terms of what do we do next? And you must have reached a point where it's like, "Okay, we've kind of had a tipping point now where it's worth putting more time into designing and developing this as an ongoing solution." So maybe if we talk about, once you got to that point, how did you go about designing and developing and implementing the solution?

Peta Pocock:

Yeah, absolutely. And just so people don't think we're superheroes. I mean, I think we are, but in all essence, when COVID first hit, it was a hard and fast line from senior executives that anything non-essential was put on hold. So it gave us that breathing time for about three months to cancel everything and take stock of where we were. And so at the time I can imagine that's probably seen as frustrating. It was actually instrumental in us being able to turn this around, because it gave us the breathing time to think, "Okay, what have we got? Where are we going? And how do we do it?" So I think it was exactly that. So it was a matter of, "Okay, what is our current stock take of what we currently offer? Can anything easily be flipped to virtual?"

And so it was a matter of probably 50% of our existing content could be. But of course, anyone listening knows instructional design for, in person versus live online is very, very different. So definitely it was a matter of at least the content it was there. So it was a stock take of what we've got that we could reuse. It was many brain storming sessions about what else can we be doing? And that involved lots of desktop research. And I'm sure lots of your listeners or organizations that we were doing desktop research on, what are they doing? What could we steal? What could we borrow, what we could lead nicely copy and paste. So a lot of that was going on. So there was the redevelopment of existing materials, the scoping of what else was out there, the same time, utilizing our data and analytics that were coming through from our pulse surveys.

And at the same time, reaching out to our senior executive to get feedback from their areas, what were their people spiriting? What did they need? What was the biggest problem that COVID was causing them that we needed to solve from that leadership perspective? So it was sort of a multifaceted training needs analysis and without the fancy strategy piece of document, because it was very much jump in and just needs to get done. So then once we got that information and the development design, as I mentioned earlier, we recognized very quickly that the live online platform wasn't something that my facilitators were so used to. So we definitely needed to do some learning in that. We also did another AITD course I promise you they're not paying me. And that one was in

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instructional design, but for focused on emerging into the online space.

So it wasn't the typical, we already had existing e-learning and that was doing fantastic. And we had great feedback, but it was taking it to the next level. And so the other half of the team did that course where the second half did the live online course. So it was kind of, we were learning, talk, walk, crawl all at once. If that makes sense. So taking the feedback and developing, designing, and then within my group, I talk a lot about teach back. So before we go live with anyone let's practice on ourselves. So we're all constantly training each other on different things to make sure things were landing. And then to be honest, Michelle, we just got to the point we had to hit play and it was just being prepared for constant evolution and constant change. Two years in, I dare say, we're still adding to the offerings, but the tweaking is far less.

So it was lesson plans that were meant to be 30 minutes suddenly became 60 or a session that was meant to be 60 minutes was only 10. All of that, it just came from just having a go at it. The staff were absolutely responsive. They knew they were in a new world as much as we were. So it was just trial and error. And then from there, as I mentioned before, we put it great culture at ABS and people were just excited that we're reaching out and offering seminars on resilience training, for example, or talking about resources that they could access to learn about mental health and how to deal with their staff. So it really became more than just your day- to-day management or leadership.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So it's obviously a lot of trying things out, adjusting, continuing to improve evolving. How does your team handle continuous improvement? Do you have some sort of rhythm around that, something deliberate around that to ensure that you are making those adjustments in a very conscious way?

Peta Pocock:

Look, yes and no. So I think like any big change, our team had to breathe and experience what they were going through as well. I've come from a background of agile iterative development. So it was very much a comfortable space for myself to play in. And from an IT perspective, it had been rolled out at ABS the agile methodology, not so much to my team. So I think I use as an opportunity to talk about how can we use these different skills of having sprints, where we go hard and fast, and then we showcase and look at what we've achieved and focus on what's great. I'd also come from a background eHealth in technology training and rolling out new systems that literally would change by the day. So I was very aware of it. So it was about how can I impart that on the team, having said at the team of super creative people, that they saw it as permission, they got the green light to do different things and just try it.

I'm a big believer in if you're going to fail, fail fast and move on and try the next thing. And because I gave them that permission and we were all doing that and living it, they were able to jump on board and embrace it. And of course part of it was, they were researching subject matter that we then present to the rest of the workforce. So they were learning as they were going about resilience and mental health and making sure that they're bringing their best self to work, but also looking after their best self at home.

Michelle Ockers:

It sounds really fluid.

Peta Pocock:

Very much.

Michelle Ockers:

Were there any kind of check in points or did you use like, "Here's a log where we're going to share what we've learned, what we're trying, what we're changing," or was the team just so well connected that it was all happening a lot more organically? Did you put any even light touch supports or structure

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around that continuous improvement process?

Peta Pocock:

Yeah, no, absolutely. So I use weekly stream status reports, the different team use, and it's based on agile project rag, status, red, amber green, and it involves stakeholders. So the different leads of the different teams did that on a weekly basis. And we'd come together once a week to rush through those. So what's on track, what's behind what are blockers because we'd also, I was from an agile background as was parts of the organization. We had daily stand-ups at that point for the different teams and then weekly team meetings to go through any issues on top of that, we use Skype for business and have the most active chat room I've ever experienced in my career. So there was always constantly tagging each other about questions and issues and reaching out. As I mentioned before, Michelle, my team had already been working remotely a few days here and there every fortnight.

So it wasn't something foreign to us, but definitely the status reports made the difference absolutely. And then of course I had to report upwards as well. So it wasn't a complete state of chaos. It was controlled chaos, if you will. I think it was the chaos on, "Let's be creative, but let's make sure we've got checkpoints," that the leadership team working on the content had to be confident that the team working on the tech could deliver things. So it was about making sure I want to do this on an LMS. Well, I need to work with my operation support team to make sure that would work. So it was definitely a very strong team structure working within sub teams and then the team leaders putting everyone together. If that makes sense.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So were there any practices that you've maintained that came out of that period in terms of how you worked together?

Peta Pocock:

Yeah, absolutely. The stand-ups. So that's happened. So all the teams we went from daily to three times a week, most teams meet twice a week now for stand-ups, which is that quick, short, sharp what's happened yesterday. What's happening today? Are there any blockers I can help you with? So it was very much being aware of it, my executive team. So my reports, we have stand-ups twice a week, as well as our weekly, which has been happening throughout that hasn't changed pre-COVID and post-COVID. The reportings dropped off a little bit because there's not so many live projects and not so many balls up in the air with my team. And that was just because there was so much to do at that time. And then other than that, what really happened, it was a great team culture, but I think COVID even brought us closer together.

As I mention a really, really active chat room. Everybody knows everyone's business, both at work and at home. And I love that about the team. So if someone's having a hard time at home, because Bob, for example, has his two kids at home, then Jules's from this team over here will come and take Bob's work. It's just that team's really come together because we've understood what everyone has going on, both at work and at home. And it's really brought the team even closer together. So from a leadership perspective, I've got complete faith that they've got each other's back. So we'll always be able to deliver, and that's a really privileged position to be in as a leader.

Michelle Ockers:

So we talk a lot about psychological safety, a lot of interest in psychological safety. And it sounds like a very safe space in your team in terms of, what has it taken to create that space? Why do you think it's such a safe space? How has that come about? Have you thought about that at all?

Peta Pocock:

It's probably it's a really good question, Michelle. I always say to my team, "Oh, you do it." I just, say approve things or whatever. And then they tend to say that obviously I do believe that leadership becomes top down. So shout out to our senior executives at ABS as well, because I think they model the behavior that then we pick up and roll with. I think the fact in times of COVID crisis, we were

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dealing with a lot of these topics that weren't traditionally sitting in the L&D area. So I think because my team was consuming it and we had a guest speaker in from the Red Cross to talk about psychological safety, for example, it was a subject matter that we got across. And so then it was just a matter of, "Let's be open and honest." And I always about no subjects off limit in our team.

We've got a mix of extroverts and introverts that doesn't matter anymore. It's about making sure that people are comfortable. So whether it's, I've learned as part of my leadership journey with that group of team in the past, pretty much all of my L&D team are raging extroverts. So at the ABS it wasn't a difference. And so I've learnt that to make sure before team meetings or rather than a meeting to jump on and do like an online chat or send an email with content for people to think about it, making sure I send the agenda out ahead of time so people can consume what the topics are and think, and then be able to bring their best self. And it's brought rich and honest and open and safe conversations. I think it's just been an evolution of, I like to say obviously my leadership, but the leadership above us. And then just the team itself, everyone saw this COVID crisis as a massive opportunity for the team. So I think everyone just jumped in head first and everybody supported each other with floating perhaps is probably the analogy.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So there's sort of the common purpose. I'm hearing a lot about empowerment and permission. Yeah. And just making the space one that people are invited into and can contribute to in different ways, which is fantastic. So let's talk about data. How does your team use data? And maybe if you can put them in the context of how in terms of the leadership development space, how does swimming, living, breathing in a data environment when it's sort of your whole world is a data world? How has that impacted the work you do and how your team uses data?

Peta Pocock:

Absolutely. Michelle, look, I'll be completely honest. I've always used data with L&D and I think it's such a great way to show return on investment. It's such a fabulous way to engage your stakeholders. You know, X amount of your staff are coming to this course versus X amount of your staff on our performance improvement plan. How can we work together, et cetera?

Michelle Ockers:

Oh, can you just pause there? I want to hone in on something you just did which I really loved. So you started off by talking about how many are coming to the course. Then you talked about how many on performance improvement plan that's business data like "Here's what's happening in the workplace," there's these indicators that there's performance improvement need in the business. So I like how in the kind of one framing you've linked learning metrics which we're very comfortable talking about with, here's the business metric. Here's why this matters. You've answered the so what, this matters to you business leader, because I can see you've got a workplace issue here.

Peta Pocock:

Oh, that's the gold Michelle. Absolutely. And it always has been, I could see here to the course come home and talk about who's attending what course and who's done their essential learning and so forth, but what's in it for me, the WIIFM factor. And so that's always been a strong thing for me. And I use that throughout my L&D career with pride, but I came to ABS aware that everybody is a data expert and I was a little bit cautious of using those in the early days. So I think for me, it was, I know that's how you sell what we do and sell its importance and show the business why it's important and the linkage, but I just needed to be, I triple checked my data in the early days to make sure that I was speaking with confidence. It is the language of the business, the fact that I was used to that language, it really made my transition to the ABS a lot easier.

And so absolutely. So for example, the wellbeing surveys we spoke about before the Australian public sector or service has an annual employee survey, and they did similar at New South Wales, within New South Wales government across all government departments. And it asked questions about their leaders, communication styles, psychological safety, that is such a rich source of data coming from our staff. And we could break it down by groups, divisions, and sections right down to teams of at least 10 people. So it could really drill down to be able to identify where in

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the business we're having issues and then be able to speak with the business, the senior executive within that business to say, "This is what the data is 10 telling us that your problems are, would you agree?" And most of the time they did, it was very rare that they would disagree, because obviously we're a statistical data organization.

So then it was taking that data back to the team and seeing how we could match it. So what learning opportunity could help improve performance in that area? And so I was just really blessed that the rich data was there, the language of the business' data. And I worked very closely with our analytics team and HR another shout out to that team. They're amazing. And they give us everything from the basics of if I talk about hygiene factors of managers, it seems like the absolute basics, but you need to manage your excessive annual leave. And that team gives me that. So can go back and say, "This is a problem. Therefore, this might be a solution to get your staff over the line in that area."

Michelle Ockers:

Do you use that data to hone in on and have conversations with specific managers? Do you get that granular with the data and say, "I can see the manager of this team or this particular part of the business have this issue. So I'm going to go work with them and support them."

Peta Pocock:

Yes. So look, I mean the structure we have and what we talk about, you sort of have your teams within sections, within divisions, within groups. So lots of different, it's a hierarchy government and a red tape. So really where I work is myself at the group and the division level with those different managers. And then my team works below that. So it's a matter of, for example, the good manager program, which we're talking about today, looking at the masterclasses and looking at attendance, and we can drill that down to look at no sorry, the individual, I mean, it's there, but it's about what part of the business. Now we are hearing from senior executives that this part of the business, they're experiencing some challenges. And yet when I look at it, only 5% of their staff attended this opportunity. So that's the kind of way we work with that.

And then it's a matter of if we have worked right down to the individual team level and that's often where the psychometric offerings come in. So increasing EQI and emotional intelligence or preferred way of thinking with HBDI, for example. So that's absolutely the level that we get to depending on what those metrics tell us. So they're absolute gold without it ABS is a very positive culture. Everyone would just say, everything's great. And so these metrics absolutely allow me to see into the different areas within the business and be able to respond to their needs.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. What I really like that you're not just pushing people through courses and there's kind of in terms of creating engagement and connection, you've got lots of potential for people to opt in the whole to choose your own adventure. And then you're doing that outreach. You're looking at what's actually happening in the business that we might be able to make a difference about. And you're using the data to start a conversation around that.

Peta Pocock:

Absolutely, yeah spot-on. And then look, as I always say, our people are the best people to tell us what they need. So it's identifying through the data, going back to the actual staff to say, "What is it that we could do to help you in this space if we don't already have it." And that's been absolutely fantastic because people will tell you what they need once you alert them to the problem you can't fix what you don't know.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Yeah. So when you look around the ABS now, and you think about what impact has this body of work had over the past two years, when you're given the opportunity to talk about that so what

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you've done all this stuff, how do you know that it's working?

Peta Pocock:

Oh, I'm proud as punch. How do I know it's working retention is fantastic. So we've got very low attrition at the moment and that's maintained everybody else in the world at the moment is talking about the great resignation, not to say people won't leave ABS and we've still got healthy turnover, but that rate still low. And we've been doing the pulse surveys that our people management wellbeing area have been doing and the results are improving. People are feeling happier at work. We've got less absenteeism. Those kind of, that data sticks. We're also we've been doing a lot of work as part of this on talent management and identification. And we've had lots of people go through promotions or stretch and acting opportunities.

So the data is backing up the data, if that makes sense. So it actually is making an impact. And I always talk about two-way communication. So people are still attending these different things that we are doing, they're dialing into or they're turning up to our recorded seminars, for example, and the numbers are just going through the roof. So the average seminar we've been having about 250 people dialing live back in the day, we could never had 250 people attend a one day class. I just don't have enough trainers or enough room.

Michelle Ockers:

That's Right. That's right. And I know there's pros and cons. It's not a matter of one being better than the other that, face-to-face and virtual have different advantages. But I think there's lots of things, lots of good things about being able to play in both worlds and things we never had the opportunity to do with purely event driven face-to-face kind of learning.

Peta Pocock:

Absolutely. And probably the other way, Michelle, I think I've seen a real difference probably in the last nine months, the business are inviting us more into their world. So when I say that, it's not just a matter of, I always talk about L&D order takers, and that's often been an issue. I need a course on this. Let's not even talk about why it's a matter of, can we talk with you L&D this is a problem we're trying to fix. How do you think you could impact this?

So wanting to work with this from a bespoke perspective, to offer consultancy advice, asking for our staff to go and do short term secondments of lack of better word inside their day-to-day business. So they can learn the business, come back and develop L&D solutions that work. And that has absolutely increased significantly over the last, I'd probably say nine months. And that I feel is a testament to what we've done. They're seeing the results and the impact we can have. And in which case we're playing together, as opposed to just L&D being here in a corporate entity versus the business.

Michelle Ockers:

Much deeper business influence. That's wonderful. So as we start wrapping up, if you had to say here's two or three key success factors, here's why this approach has worked so well. And why we've been able to put ourselves in this position that you've just described two or three things. You've probably already talked about them, but to sum up, what would they be?

Peta Pocock:

My team, 100% they delivered it, they did it, they were invested. So the team, the business being open and the business being open has a lot to do with COVID. And I said about COVID being a positive for us, and I want to make sure this is not taken out of context, but the business had to get their staff through really tough times. And how do we do it? We had to rely on L&D and my team were phenomenal. So it was just that combination of senior executives saying that we needed to do something, my team being willing to do anything and everything, and COVID coming into play.

Michelle Ockers:

Fantastic. So in terms of doing things with a relatively small team and a limited budget and being

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innovative, what tips might you have for others who are in a similar position where they don't have huge resources, they can't just go out and buy stuff off-the-shelf, which I think could be a bit of an advantage in some ways and getting more creative. But what tips do you have for others who might want to do more and be more innovative with a small team and a low budget?

Peta Pocock:

I think don't let it stop you. I have worked in the big teams with the big budget, so I absolutely understand you can buy things off-the-shelf to your point, Michelle, we often buy things off-the-shelf and then want to tailor it anyway. So this is your chance to do it your way that suits your business and your needs so far as there is always a cheap way of doing things. And so it's just thinking smarter, not harder. So it's what have we currently got? And let's not spend our time arguing that there's better technology out there, or there's better opportunities. Excuse me. It's about saying, what have we got and what can we do to make it work? Not, no, it's a matter of how can we make this work and throwing it in there and being prepared to fail. I think this is something that most people aren't prepared to do. And you just have to, when you've got limited budget, limited resource not everything's going to hit and that's completely fine because we've got to give it a go and see what happens. And so I would just say, be brave, be prepared to fail, give it a go, do it with the mini budget. Everybody at your organization knows what situation you're in. So you haven't got to sit there and give a disclaimer as to why it's not fancy with disco balls and whatnot. You've just got to present what you've got and give it a go. And I think that absolutely worked.

Michelle Ockers:

Run those small experiments.

Peta Pocock:

Yes.

Michelle Ockers:

Fantastic. And for listeners, I do a prep call before I do each of these sessions with the guests. So we've got some sense what we're going to talk about, but I've got to say Peta, there was lots of great stuff that came up there that we hadn't talked about in the prep call.

Peta Pocock:

Sorry.

Michelle Ockers:

No, no, don't say, sorry. It's been a wonderful process of discovery and deepening my understanding of the fantastic work that you and your team have done. So thank you so much for sharing your story. I know people are getting a stack of value out of it.

Peta Pocock:

Oh, I hope so. Thank you, Michelle. It's been an absolute privilege to be here and shout out to my team who do everything. They're amazing.

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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 experienced, 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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