Learning Uncut Episode 158
A Self-Directed Learning Experiment – Matthew Murray and
Sydney Cannon
Hosted by Michelle Ockers

Michelle Ockers:
Welcome to another episode of Learning Uncut. I'd like to start in the spirit of reconciliation by acknowledging traditional custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community, and to pay respect to elders past, present and emerging. Today, we are talking to two guests who are joining us from the United States. Welcome, Sydney Cannon.

Sydney Cannon:
Thanks, Michelle. Lovely to be speaking with you today.

Michelle Ockers:
It's nice to have you here. And Matthew Murray, welcome.

Matthew Murray:
Thanks, Michelle. Delighted to be here.

Michelle Ockers:
I'm really curious about today's conversation for a couple of reasons. I just want to thank you for reaching out to me with this story. It's always lovely when someone sticks their hand up and says, I've got something we're doing that might be interesting to others. And I think this one will be really relevant and interesting to many, if not all of our listeners. So thank you for that. And the second thing that's really interesting about this is we're doing this for the first time ever in the seven year history of the podcast is a two part instalment, a before and after. So we are having today's conversation before you start the initiative that we're talking about, which I think is another fascinating thing for us to do as well. So can you start with a brief introduction to Bain and Company and your roles there?

Matthew Murray:
Yeah, I'm happy to do that. Bain & Company is a top three global consulting firm. We have about 20,000 partners and employees across the globe. And Sydney and I, we are both part of the digital learning team, which sits within basically our L&D team. So what we're talking about today is we're talking about an initiative targeted at a particular segment of the population at Bain internally.

Michelle Ockers:
Is your team looking after digital learning globally, or is it a particular region or part of the business that you take care of?

Matthew Murray:
Yeah, it's global. It's pretty much across the entire world, across, I think we have 65 offices, something like that.

Michelle Ockers:
And what's your role, Matthew, not just with the campaign, but just generally your role in the digital learning team?

Matthew Murray:
Yeah, sure. Well, I have the good fortune of being the vice president of digital learning. So I' lucky enough to lead the team of currently 11 people in the digital learning team.

Michelle Ockers:
So Sydney, can you talk to us a little about your work? What is it you do? What do you enjoy about it?

Sydney Cannon:
So I've been at Bain & Company for five years now on the digital learning team. I'm currently a senior manager and I lead our learning engagement and integration work. So that encompasses a lot of things from marketing, communications to tracking our usage and analytics of our learning experience platform at Bain. And you asked what I love about it, and it actually is what we just mentioned, that our team just really focuses on finding innovative ways to leverage technology for learning. And that's something that's always really kind of been a driving force for me in my own career.

Michelle Ockers:
Thank you, Sydney. I think there are people out there thinking, oh, I wish I had Sydney's role. It sounds really interesting. So we're talking about running a micro campaign focused on self-directed learning. I think, are we around a week out from the start of the campaign at this point in time?

Sydney Cannon:
Yeah, a little less than a week. So we're going to launch next Tuesday, right on the 1st of October.

Michelle Ockers:
Fantastic. And what prompted you to run a micro campaign focused on self-directed learning?

Matthew Murray:
There's a lot of reasons that we'll get into, and some of them have to do with the culture here at Bain, and some of them have to do with how we're trying to shift the mindset and shift the learning culture here at Bain a little bit. So this campaign, we're calling it the October Skills Boost. It's going to run throughout the month of October. It's targeted at a subpopulation within Bain. So even though Bain & Company is a management consulting firm, most of the people here are consultants and partners. This particular campaign is actually targeting what we call functional professionals. And functional professionals are internal staff. They're not client facing. They're IT, they're talent, they're finance, those kinds of groups. It's quite a big population, several thousand folks are in that population. And so we are running this micro campaign as we're calling it, because what we're trying to do is we're trying to encourage certain levels within that functional professional population to be more proactive and build the habit of self-directed learning to get into our digital platform and to spend time in there and to build their skills and to take ownership over building their skills through a more regular habit of engaging with learning.

Michelle Ockers:
So what's happening at the moment, like just take us through sort of almost baselining, what are the behaviours and mindsets you're hoping to shift with the campaign? And what do you want to see people doing perhaps more of, differently, stop doing compared to today?

Matthew Murray:
Within Bain, Bain is a phenomenal place to work. It gets a lot of accolades for because people love working here. And a big part of the reason for that is the people here, right? And so it has a very strong emphasis on networking, building relationships, doing things together

with other people. And it's very, very grounded in that culturally. And that carries over into the learning. On the functional professional side, remember, these are the folks who aren't client facing. There's less of an apprenticeship culture, but there's still an emphasis on live learning. And most of the learning that's happening currently is scheduled learning, whether it's virtual or whether it's in the office, because we have a very strong local office culture as well. So a big part of what we're trying to do then is we're trying to, as Sydney mentioned, we've had the digital learning team here at Bain for a number of years, probably six years at this point, I think. And we built good adoption of digital learning within Bain, by which I mean self-directed online learning. But one of the things we're trying to do is we're trying to encourage people to be more proactive about that and to not wait for scheduled learning, but to go in and take self-directed learning and own their own learning paths rather than depend so much on scheduled learning or learning that is pushed to them. So that's a big emphasis for what we're trying to do.

Michelle Ockers:
Okay, so Sydney, you live and breathe learning engagement in your role. You're probably looking at a lot of data on an ongoing basis. We know that it's about people going in and pulling more learning rather than waiting for it to be scheduled or allocated to them. What are you hoping to see and how will you know if it's happening?

Sydney Cannon:
I think what we've seen just as kind of our baseline engagement, it's really good. We're happy with where we're at from an adoption perspective of our learning experience platform and the self-directed learning. But what we do notice is a lot of that is driven by the campaigns that we're running, the push campaigns, curated resources, et cetera. And for this group of people specifically, it's a really broad range of skill sets and learning needs that can't always be met by those curated resources and just what we're able to do within our team. So I think in terms of scalability, that behaviour change to actually go proactively search for learning and development and be really intentional about what skills am I trying to develop and where are the resources that I can help me on that journey? It's the change that we're really looking for, and it'll help to just scale that learning across this population specifically. And we also do see a lot of engagement around times of relevant new tools and things that are released at Bain. So AI is a big push right now. And so whenever we have content around that, and there are big organization-wide announcements that's another driver. So yeah, that's what we've noticed so far.

Michelle Ockers:
Okay, so what do you know about what motivates this particular group of people, your functional professionals, to take charge of their own professional development, to want to learn more beyond the scheduled stuff? What do you understand their drivers are? Or even what hypotheses do you have that you might be testing out here?

Matthew Murray:
Yeah, I think that's a great question. I think some of them are doing it. I think some of them get that this is really important to continuously learn to be more self-directed. It helps you in your career. It helps you in this rapidly changing environment that we live in where skills are shifting and you know, expertise is undergoing a lot of change. So there is a core group of folks within this target population that we think is doing it. And we actually, part of the campaign we're going to be running includes video testimonials from members of the target population who are doing this already. And so they're the gold standard that we're holding up. I think the challenge is, and this is quite typical, I think, in many organizations, we often hear people don't have time for learning within the functional professional population, especially very, very busy, very fast moving environment, a lot going on. And we frequently

hear this adage that, well, I don't have time for learning. And really what that means when you pull it apart means, I don't have time for learning unless it's scheduled or unless it's something that's blocked out and it is something that is recognized as what we would call formal learning. So we want to challenge that a little bit. And we want to challenge people and say to them, well, you're probably already learning, you're just maybe not being as intentional about it as you might be. And you're also perhaps not recognizing how critical this is gonna be for you to continue to develop in your role and grow in your role and grow some of these skills. So that's what we're trying to accomplish with this campaign. And one thing I should say, which we haven't got to yet, but we're trying to do this in a very scrappy way. We don't have a ton of resources to do this. And so we try to design this in a way that it hasn't taken a lot of people. It's a very, very minimal budget. We're giving out some prizes, but they're pretty low key. And so that was the challenge that Sydney and I set for ourselves. We're like, okay, how can we do this? Can we do something that doesn't require a ton of resources, doesn't require a lot of budget, but still can have some impact? And so, it's a little experimental. It's a little scrappy. It's a little bit different to typically how we do things at Bain, but that's part of the learning process here for us.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. This thing about time, interesting, interesting barrier because it comes up everywhere. Every organization I work with around learning strategy, what's your number one? It's time. Everyone's too busy. We don't have time for learning.

Sydney Cannon:
It definitely comes up a lot. We often talk about value for time spent, and that's how we try to think about the time issue. So are we providing content that's really relevant and impactful? in a package that's very easily accessible. And that can help us to get over that perceived barrier of time. I do think now people are very time poor. And so it's a change also in mindset about how to be intentional. Often you have to learn how to learn. So a lot of the copy within the email communications is about habit formation and motivating yourself and kind of key practical tips and tricks to fit this in your day to day.

Michelle Ockers:
OK, so we're starting to talk about what's in the campaign or what are we trying to encourage. And I like you talking about sort of habit formation here and breaking it down and making it feel more approachable. Tell us more about the campaign. What does it look like?

Sydney Cannon:
So it's a mini campaign. There's going to be four emails over the course of four weeks to these 3,500 or so functional professionals from the specialist to the director level. So broad range of skill sets and needs there. So we're asking for one hour of learning per week, which we felt like was motivating, but also very achievable within this population. And there are a few features in the campaign that were we've placed in there to try to drive that motivation and a little bit of incentivization as well for participation. So there's a badge within our learning experience platform that you will get if you achieve those four hours of learning within the month. And we are also doing some special prizes along the way for kind of top learners and recognizing folks and actually building that into the communications as we go, so the communications will change over time to actually shout out departments or particular people who are excelling in their learning for that bit of competition and motivation, so to speak. And then also we've built in a new feature to the platform that is within the homepage. So your landing page is personalized. You go in and you'll actually have a list of pre-curated resources. So making it very, very easy to engage in that way as well. We're also going to include people that engage in a pilot of a conversational AI pilot that we're going to be doing post campaign as well. So little extra bit of incentivization there. And then I

think within the communications themselves, we talked about this a little bit, but we're using peer storytelling which is something that even on a broader level, when we talk to folks in our marketing and internal communications functions at Bain, have said that that's usually how they generate the most interest and clicks on their communications. So we think that's gonna be a powerful tool as well, because there are people that are doing this, their stories are inspirational, and we hope that that really motivates and ignites some new thinking.

Michelle Ockers:
So, is each email literally a peer story and then some sort of call to action or just you talk me through how you've shaped those emails?

Sydney Cannon:
Yeah, so we're taking in consideration some of those best practices that we've learned along the way about what kind of types of emails really resonate. Typically, we're embedding a link above the fold, so to speak, to make it really easy for people to access content, we have very clear call to action and it literally says what to do this week and no more than three actions that they're meant to take and they're very practical should be applicable to a broad audience. And then we have that video compilation of their peers talking about different topics that match kind of the theme of each email. Some of them are more focused on habit formation. Some of them are more focused on how has self-directed learning really impacted your career. And so it's more of that career journey storytelling, but yeah, all of the videos and embedded match the theme of the email as well.

Matthew Murray:
The one thing I might add is, again, we're under no illusion that this is going to change the culture of the firm. There's a series of emails that that's only going to do so much. We know that this is not going to revolutionize learning at Bain, necessarily. But we're very curious to see, OK, how far can we move the needle with something like this? If we were doing something more, and maybe we will have to, depending upon the outcome of this, maybe we'll, if we were doing something more robust, which had daily nudges or had some kind of app-based approach to driving habit formation, that would probably have a bigger impact. But we're kind of curious about, OK, what would something like this, something thoughtfully designed, that we're using a pretty traditional communication vehicle like email, which we know a lot of people don't even pay attention to. So how impactful could that be if we designed it the way that we did using some of the tricks and motivating factors that Sydney outlined? So it's a bit of a learning experience for us as well to see, okay, could this be powerful? What kind of an impact could this have? And what can we learn from this experience so that we can make it better the next time?

Michelle Ockers:
What's your plan going in around the degree of kind of monitoring and flexibility you're giving yourselves with the campaign?

Sydney Cannon:
Yeah, I mean, the emails are drafted, but I think we're always open to feedback and change. So if we're receiving feedback or we're seeing that things aren't particularly working, we'll be measuring that. We use an internal communications tool to send these communications, which allows us to track some metrics that we'll pay attention to, even down to like what links are people clicking on the most. So we'll definitely look at those things and adapt along the way and document what we learn like that said, it's definitely a learning experience for us as well.

Michelle Ockers:
So what are you hoping to learn each of you when you look back sort of what are you most curious about? What do you think you might be able to learn and then lean into or leverage?

Matthew Murray:
Fundamentally, we want to learn, could something like this be beneficial? Does it actually have the return on input or whatever you want to call it? Is it worthwhile, given what it takes to set something up like this, which isn't a ton of effort, but you still want to look at, okay, is it worth trying something like this again? And then I think we also want to learn a little bit more about our target population, which we know a fair bit about them already. And we're part of that target population for one thing, but we're curious, I think, to see, you know, are we tapping into something that may be latent? Because we know some people are doing this already. And what is it that motivates folks or gets people to actually change behaviour? So a big part of what we're going to be doing is looking at activity within our digital learning platform and determining, OK, are people coming back more frequently? That's one of the things we're going to be measuring. So we have a whole slew of different metrics. We're going to be running a survey at the end, of course, which will get feedback on whether people thought it was worthwhile or not. But it is a little bit of a different approach because, again, the traditional approach might be something that feels a bit more top down, that feels a bit more like senior leadership is encouraging you to do this or suggesting you should do this. And so we're deliberately trying to come at it with a bit of a different angle because we think the whole ethos of self-directed learning and continuous learning is It does come from within almost, and it comes from the individuals who we're trying to reach out to. So we'll see. We'll see. We'll see how successful this is.

Michelle Ockers:
How about you, Sydney? What are you hoping to learn?

Sydney Cannon:
Yeah, I mean, it's definitely more of the same of what Matthew mentioned, but I think most interested to learn more about this target population. We've done a lot of work with our client facing population. And I think we've done a good job of understanding what motivates them and what drives them. And so the opportunity to do that here is exciting. I mean, I have turned into a bit of a learning data nerd. So I'm always looking at like what communications are resonating, where are people going within the site, where are they clicking on in the emails. So even that granular data will be useful for us as a function, as a team, because we'll use it in other places. So we collect a lot of data and I think over time we've matured a lot how we analyse that data and then make decisions based off of it. So I'm just excited to get more data and incorporate it into our plans for the future.

Michelle Ockers:
Great. As we wrap up this first part of the conversation, what else is on your mind as you get ready to launch this campaign? What's kind of playing around up there in terms of what's exciting you? What might you be concerned about?

Sydney Cannon:
A big thing has been partnering with our professional development and performance team. And they've done a lot of help just editing kind of the copy and helping us to inform the messaging a little bit. And this is a little bit more competitive of an approach than we've taken in the past. So we have very little kind of compliance related training things that we do in the past. So that edge of a little bit of competition, I'm really curious to see if that drives any additional motivation, any additional engagement within the system.

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Michelle Ockers:
Yeah, that's interesting. I'll be curious about how that plays out in the cultural context then. And how about yourself, Matthew, what else is running around in your head right now about the campaign?

Matthew Murray:
Well, I mean, the big one is, you know, what is the extent of the reach, right? Again, we got 3500 people here. We're very, very busy. Obviously, we talked about that. And so I think we are curious about, okay, well, what percentage of that 3,500 is this gonna resonate with? And I think that's the intriguing one for us. And it maybe it's only 5%, maybe it's 3%, maybe it's 10%. There's some interesting questions there. So there's a sort of secondary benefit to us where we can say, okay, here are our super users or here are our ambassadors. And so how can we target that population with follow on communications and involve them in some future campaigns we're doing. And then again, what we're trying to achieve ultimately is some sort of snowball effect where they can then socialize this with their team members and you've got the cultural ambassadors out there. So really, in many ways, what we're trying to achieve is cultural change, which is very, very difficult as we all know. But we think this could be an interesting way at least to give us a little bit of an edge to accomplish that.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah, I think that's an interesting objective to see what surfaces there. I like that angle as well. So I am completely curious to check in with you and see what actually happened, what you learned. I love this short, sharp, well-considered test and learn kind of approach to run an experiment and see where that takes you. So thanks again for reaching out. We'll talk soon.

Matthew Murray:
Thanks, Michelle. Appreciate it.

Sydney Cannon:
Thanks Michelle so much.

Michelle Ockers:
So we are back. It's about seven weeks since the first part of the conversation, about three weeks after the end of your October Skills Boost campaign. So what happened? Did you run the campaign as planned? And what did you see? What happened?

Sydney Cannon:
We did. Several things. I think we had set up a series of kind of what our success metrics were and some of them were engagement within our learning platform. Some of them are around engagement within the emails themselves. So we have a tool that we use to measure engagement of our communications. And then we also had created kind of a post campaign survey. And so we were watching those things evolve over time. We were watching visits to the platform. We had a badging mechanism that was built into this campaign, people to get a certain number of learning hours and get this kind of completion badge as part of the more competitive side of things. And so we were watching that over time and we did adapt some of the email content itself based on what we were seeing. So a lot of the latter part of the communications were adapted to say, this function's performing really well, and this function, and you all have raised your learning hours by x percent over last week, and adding some of those things into the communications. So the communications themselves that were pre-planned did change slightly based on that. And the other thing that we changed is we actually added a sixth communication because we were seeing towards the end of the campaign that there were actually quite a few folks that

were really close to the threshold of that four hours of learning. And we wanted to give an additional boost just to that group of learners. So we did end up adding one additional kind of more targeted email to that group of learners. So that's a bit of what we changed, what we adapted along the way from like a process standpoint. Matthew, do you want to jump in and say maybe at a macro level what we saw?

Matthew Murray:
Well, at a macro level, we have mixed results, to be honest, which we expected, to be fair. If you recall, this is a pretty scrappy effort. We were deliberately trying to keep this low intensity, see what we could do with pretty minimal resources to try and move the needle slightly. That was really the objective of the initiative. And so the impact was somewhat mixed, and we can get into this in a little bit more detail. Some of it very encouraging, some of it not discouraging, but gave us more insight into, okay, how do we approach this audience? How do we go about doing something similar to this in the future?

Michelle Ockers:
And I guess the whole point is it was an experiment. So it's something you were putting out there to see what you could learn. And we did speak about that. So what did you learn about this workforce, about their motivation perhaps, and about how, you know, what might work and what doesn't work with engaging them in more self-directed learning habits?

Sydney Cannon:
I think one thing that was really interesting to me was when we had initially thought about the campaign and what kind of motivations or incentivization we were going to do, we built in a little bit of this competition. And so I mentioned some of the content adapted to say, this function is doing really well. This is our top three functions out of all of them to try to create a little bit of friendly competition between the functions. And what we found is that that actually didn't really have much of an impact. And so kind of a key learning for us was we know that there's competitive nature within our culture. And competitive might not be the right word, but definitely a high achieving, high performing culture. And so capturing that edge, you almost have to find the more natural rivalries, for lack of a better way to describe it. And it wasn't necessarily at the function level. So could we recreate something like that at an office level or more micro level to figure out what works in our organization and where that motivation to compete with one another actually exists. But I think a key learning was doesn't really exist function to function. I don't think our finance team is that focused on out learning the marketing team, for example.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah, interesting because a lot of this is cultural context as well, right? And you talked about where are the, you used the term natural rivalries, but what do we know about our culture and our people that we can lean into without having to create something artificial?

Sydney Cannon:
Yeah, definitely.

Matthew Murray:
Yeah, I would totally agree with that. I think one other thing that we learned is that the it was, again, this is probably to be anticipated, but it really came very, very clear was that it was hard to separate what we were doing from everything else that was going on. In the lives of these people and within the firm as well so we ran this experiment over the course of October, and then as October proceeded we realize okay well there's this is going on over here you know the marketing function is doing this particular push around their learning, for example, we hadn't anticipated that. And then later in the month, there was something else

going on that was related to other firm priorities that we hadn't anticipated or couldn't anticipate either. So from evaluating the impact of what we did, it did muddy the waters a bit and dilute the ability to separate out, well, this was demonstrably because of what we did in our campaign versus, well, this would have happened anyway, or this happened because of other reasons. What we did find, and we can get into some of the metrics a little bit here, but what we did see, we could graph the engagement in our digital learning platform every day over the course of the month, and we could see a very direct correlation between when we sent our messages out and how many people came into the platform and actually engaged in digital learning.

Michelle Ockers:
Sydney, you're the data girl. What did you see in terms of actual numbers?

Sydney Cannon:
Yeah, to kind of build off of Matthew's last point, I think something interesting was we did see those spikes in engagement and that translated into a metric that we use is monthly active usage of our platform and we look at that for different target audiences and so of course we had a baseline for this audience going into the campaign and it ended up being the highest monthly active usage for this target population that we had seen in the last seven months. So it's eight and a half percent higher than our 2024 average overall. So, quite a big increase there, but we saw that the percentage of repeat learners, which is something we look at as well. So, are people just visiting once? Are they coming back within the month? Was actually slightly lower than our 2024 average. So, what that kind of translated to us as well, the emails and the communication strategy helps to keep it top of mind and maybe drove more of a volume of visits over the month, but didn't necessarily translate into a behaviour change. And so when we're thinking about a long-term behaviour change, which is really what we're trying to motivate and inspire overall, perhaps this isn't the right mechanism or is only one piece of the puzzle. Then in terms of the target population visiting, we saw 39 percent of our target population visited during the month, which is actually pretty good and higher again than our typical monthly visits.

Michelle Ockers:
Right. So more visits, more people visiting, but not necessarily the sustained repeat visits across that group.

Sydney Cannon:
Right. And the messages definitely resonated. We had a higher open rate on all of our messages than our typical, than our averages, which was nice. And we also break it down into, or the tool we use breaks it down into read, skim, or glance. And you're basically put in different buckets based on the amount of seconds that you spend with that email open. And our read rates were actually much, much higher than our typical email communication is. So the content was compelling and differentiated enough, I think, for people to spend more time on it than they typically would with our L&D-focused emails or our platform-focused emails.

Michelle Ockers:
So that's some of the quantitative data. You did a survey as well to gather feedback. How did that go? And it can be really hard to get response rates up on surveys sometimes, right?

Sydney Cannon:
Well, it can be really hard or it can be impossible, which in this case, it was impossible. Big surprise for us, although probably shouldn't have been too surprising, is we did not get any survey responses. And we decided not to pursue it. We decided not to push it with this population. We already had kind of a new initiative that's now happening with the top

learners as like a prize for their engagement during this campaign. They've now been invited to an exclusive pilot of a conversational AI platform. And so we were already well on our way with that and decided cut our losses.

Matthew Murray:
To carry on that theme, I mean, I think that was one of the learnings we took away was that clearly this was resonating with some people with a section of the population, you know, we could see that. And a section of the population were getting badges, a section of the population, we invited them to participate in this follow-up pilot and got a good response to that. So they kind of raised their hands and wanted to engage in that. You know, maybe we were just reaching the population that was already engaging in self-directed and continuous learning. And so we don't know, you know, there's no way for us to be able to measure that at this point. It clearly did resonate with a segment of the population. One other thing that was interesting was in our messages, we included links to videos of people who were in the target population who were already doing this and who shared really good tips and recommendations. And these are quite short videos, under two minutes, very digestible. Back to the question about what do people do with the emails? Well, they read the emails, but they didn't really click into the videos, that tended to be one step too far for them, which was unfortunate because actually, I think in some ways, the videos were the most compelling part of the whole thing. So that was a learning for us. Why was that? Well, maybe there's a big question in our culture around, is this going to be time well spent? And maybe they didn't feel like it would be because it didn't have anything essential or compulsory or mandatory about it.

Michelle Ockers:
So one of the things you were talking about being interested in as one of the things you could lean into was identifying who some of your champions might be in terms of those people who are responding most effectively, applying their self-directed learning behaviours and how you might utilize them more effectively. You'd already identified some of those people through the videos and sought to use their experience through creating the videos to encourage others. What do you know about them? What makes them different from those who aren't engaging? Is it them? Is it their roles? Is it their environment? What ideas do you have? Either we know this for sure, or here's what we're hypothesizing.

Matthew Murray:
To my mind, this is the fundamental issue at stake, right, which is we weren't doing this just for the sake of doing it. We were doing it in the sincere belief that there's a correlation between people who are more self-directed in their learning and their performance. They perform better and we know the external research tells us this and plenty of data to back that up, we didn't have that data, we cannot get that data internally for various data privacy reasons. But I think if you were going to do a campaign like this, that would be what you're aiming for. It's like, can we demonstrate there is a connection between people who do this and their performance, that they're at a higher performance level perhaps? Because I think in, especially in our culture, if you can establish that connection, or you can show that correlation, then people will pay attention because they'll be like, okay, well if I want to succeed and if I want to do better, I should do this if I'm not currently doing it. So to answer your question, we don't know a lot about this population. We do know they were across different business functions. We do know they were global. They were across all parts of the globe. We really don't know more about them at this point. So what is preventing the other population from doing this? And that I think is the fundamental question. And again, we had no expectation that we would shift mindsets overnight by doing this, but that is the big takeaway from this is like, how can we start to penetrate that other population and move

some of those folks over towards the continuous learning side? That's really the objective of this.

Michelle Ockers:
So what's your next step there? How do you think you might start moving on that? You still thinking about that?

Sydney Cannon:
Yeah, I mean, I think we are. We've talked about how to uncover that silent group, which is tricky. On the one hand, we've identified now super users, people that will be promoters. And we can listen to them, how they think about their learning performance. There's a lot of great stories there that we already uncovered through doing the videos and the pure storytelling piece of this. And then there's the people who are the active detractors. And we can also really easily identify them as well. We do a series of focus groups. We do annual or biannual surveys. Those folks are easy to pick out as well. It's the middle group. It's the group that isn't taking action, but not necessarily talking to us about why they're not or why they don't love our learning system or our learning offerings that aren't vocal about it. That's the group that we'd love to try to tap into. So it's something we're certainly thinking about for 2025, how to tap into that group and what kind of opportunities we can create to try to surface them and then listen to them.

Matthew Murray:
I think to follow on from that, one takeaway we had was we went pretty broad with this. We went out to a pretty big population of about 3,500 people. If we were to do it again or moving forward, we would probably go narrower. I think there was a lot of different functions, a lot of different people in different roles, hard to generalize across a broad population like that, quite a few different levels within those functions. So moving ahead, I think to get to your, well, what could come next? I think we would go more targeted and we would pick a couple of functions and say, okay, who are the champions in these functions? Have the conversations with them and really kind of build out from those functions and try and shift the needle a little bit within those functions and build the success stories and then deploy that elsewhere perhaps.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. I don't know if you ever heard of the idea of Trojan mice, which are kind of like, it's part of thinking about experiments where, you know, the experiment is you've got a hypothesis you want to test out. So you had a hypothesis here about, you know, we might be able to move the needle if we do kind of this nudge, this little nudge, email nudge campaign. There was another hypothesis in there about the use of videos to share peer stories and will that motivate. So when you're framing a hypothesis, it's like it may work, it may not work, but we'll learn something. And then we can frame our next round of hypotheses. So it's about sending out these little short, sharp experiments and then going, well, what did we learn? And what's our next round of experiments? So in that regard, you've learned some valuable stuff that you can build upon. What, if anything, have you learned about running experiments in themselves to make sure you learn things from those experiments?

Matthew Murray:
You can run experiments and we did run experiments, but I did think about the value of the touch points we have with our population. And we hear a lot, I think most organizations do, but especially at our organization, you don't want to clutter people's inboxes. You've got incredibly busy professionals. They've got a lot going on. And so there is an awareness and there is an expectation that you won't send them an email or a message unless it's

important, right? Unless it counts. And so that was one takeaway for me was, Okay, well, we can run experiments and we should run experiments, but we've got to be thoughtful about that. We've got to be thoughtful about if we only have X number of touch points over the course of the year, how are we going to use those touch points? And maximizing and optimizing so that we are running the right experiments and we're running ones that are going to really give us the kind of insights and the value that we need. So I don't regret what we did. I think it was a great effort, but I would say that is a pretty important consideration is we did quote unquote, use up five of our touchpoints in this campaign. And we would have to reflect on that and determine, okay, well, was that a good value for touchpoint or should we have thought a bit more ruthlessly about how many times we were reaching out to that population.

Sydney Cannon:
Yeah, I mean, I think that kind of sprang a discussion that we've been having since, which is around like the types of experiments already categories of experiments. And that's where that pure play thing came up. So in a past life, I worked for a sales organization, heavy marketing organization, And we used kind of the concept of a pure play, which would be just that that product, the flagship product and what we would do from a marketing standpoint around that product versus collaboration or partnerships. And that was more, you know, different brands in the family and how those are playing together. And so how can we, within our L&D world, kind of apply that same thinking to think what is just a communication or a touch point from only the learning perspective and how do we experiment there, maximize that impact versus an we do a series of smaller campaigns or more targeted campaigns that are done in collaboration with different parts of the business to maximize that impact as well and make it resonate a bit more? So for example, partnering closely with our PD, Professional Development and Performance team, on something that they're releasing or trying to promote and making sure that our messaging is really tight and we're sending the same type of message to that same audience to promote both of our products or both of our kind of whatever we're trying to push or drive.

Matthew Murray:
One other element of this, which we talked a lot about, is what we were trying to do on some levels, it was a meta skill, right? It's learning to learn or it's learning to be a continuous learner. It's building that skill. And if you think about the pure play, well, maybe there's a pure play around something that's more skill specific or topical like AI, for example. Maybe we could hook on to something like AI where instead of just coming out and saying, you should have a stronger impetus to be self-directed in your learning, you should build this skill of agility and continuous learning and learning to learn. If we hooked that on to something like AI, which resonated and felt a little more sort of urgent perhaps, would that be a better way to get the end result that we're looking for if we were able to create that kind of synthesis with something that really sucked people in because it felt very meaningful in their lives at that point?

Sydney Cannon:
I think there's definitely a way in using that latter approach, like using skills that are top of mind for people. I will say I think it's been a bit nebulous maybe in the past to say learning agility and things like that that we understand in our context and understand the importance of. I don't know that that always resonates with folks or they feel it's urgent enough to undertake. So perhaps that urgency isn't there. I wonder with everything happening with AI If that changes, I do wonder if that's going to change the way people feel in terms of that urgency of learning new skills and learning to learn, because I think that's a huge aspect of using AI tools.

Matthew Murray:
I mean, I would say I think it is a really, it is the kind of crux of the challenge, right? Which is, we know that skills are rapidly evolving. We know we live in a VUCA world and it just keeps getting seemingly more accelerated and AI is contributing to that where it's becoming very apparent that skills of today are going to be obsolete tomorrow. So that was part of what we were trying to plug into and the idea that in order to be successful long term, you know, you need to be doing this, you need to be self-directed in your learning. However, balance that with, with the fact that, you know, there's a lot going on, and there are urgent things that people feel like they have to address in the moment. And that, I think, gets back to the point about the arguments going to resonate differently with different populations.

Sydney Cannon:
I think like overall what this is pointing to and other experiments that we've ran this year from like a communication standpoint are pointing to more segmented messaging and not trying to do one audience, one message. So I think that we have to be adaptable. We have to be agile in that way and try new things to try to reach a really diverse audience that frankly cares about different things at different times.

Michelle Ockers:
Yes. So this gets down to almost thinking about, you know, what are our personas and there's enough nuance here that rather than thinking we've got one of your functional stuff as one group or one persona, you're going to have to get a bit more nuanced than that. So that's an important learning, right?

Matthew Murray:
Yeah, I think it's really important. And I've seen this in other experiments we've done as well, where I think also what changes is when you're thinking about success, it used to be in the old days, success was, okay, well, we got to get 90% or something like that. Nowadays, I think it's much more micro than that. It is much more segmented where okay, well having success with 25% of the population is actually really good, you know, because people are motivated by different things. And so even though that may on the surface of it sound not all that impressive, if you can reach that 25% and get them to do something they weren't currently previously doing, that can be very, very significant. And that can be very successful if you're able to target a subsection of the population. So I think it is, popping up in quite a few different contexts where how we measure and think about success is shifting as well.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. So in terms of informing your ongoing practices, is there anything immediate that you're applying out of what you've learned here, either something you're going to keep doing, something you already do, like that you're doing, you're going to do more of, something you might start doing or something you might stop doing?

Sydney Cannon:
Two things immediately to me is just keep experimenting, keep learning. It's fun. It challenges the way we think. And I think we have a good process as a team to do the research, set it up, manage a program and then measure it. And we've gotten quite good at that. And then I also think just the importance of if we are going to go the way of more of the collaboration and partnerships and testing things within that realm, just really nurturing and building our alliances across different functions inside and outside of talent at Bain.

Matthew Murray:
Yeah, and I do think we do want to tap into the folks that did participate in and use them as champions and learn from them, like you suggested earlier. That's going to be critical. We

almost have as an output of this, you know, we now have a defined group that we can plug into in a way that we didn't have before. So if nothing else, it was incredibly valuable for that. So that, I think, is what we keep moving towards, right? Keep improving that way.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah, this stuff is messy, right? People are messy. The workplace is complex. Things are shifting around us all the time. And sometimes when case studies are presented, we only share the stuff that's fully formed and we gloss over this messy middle, right? So we could be sitting here in a year's time, having a very different conversation about your most recent experiment or about how you've continued to evolve this. But we're kind of in the messy middle with you. And you're going there and, you know, it's fantastic that you're sharing this along the way and learning from it. But things are messy and we have to be willing to go through this kind of exploration in order to get to the other end.

Matthew Murray:
Yeah, I totally agree. I mean, a lot of this was about culture change. A lot of this is about sparking something that would move us further along this quite long journey that we're going to undertake towards a different culture around learning and a different culture around how people think about their self-development. It's partly about skill building, but it was fundamentally about behaviour and what is your expectation about how you learn and how you think about learning, right? So, so you're right. I think, you know I expect Sydney and I will be back in three years time and we'll be able to tell you, yes, we have shifted the culture. It doesn't happen overnight. It takes time. It takes resilience and it takes persistence and it takes just you know learning from what you do and then adjusting and adapting and like you say trying not to get overwhelmed by the messiness but trying to trying to see through the messy stuff and tease out okay what do we learn from this and how can we do what we're doing better as a result of what we've learned from this. So again, overall, I'm encouraged by what we've learned and what we've seen. And we know we have the germ of change in there. We know we have the beginning of the change in there. We can see it, so we can build off that.

Sydney Cannon:
Absolutely. Yeah, there's a glimmer. There's a glimmer there.

Michelle Ockers:
Which is good. So based on your experience with this campaign, what advice would you give other learning and development professionals who are looking to build self-directed learning habits?

Matthew Murray:
My biggest learning is you do think about the culture of your organization, right? It's absolutely critical to start there. So you're not going to have a one-size-fits-all stages of change. I know there are stages of change modelled, but a lot of that has to be grounded in the reality of the learning culture that currently exists. So I'd make sure that you think about it in terms of what currently resonates in your organization and how people currently learn and how they are approaching learning. And then I would encourage people to think about, at the very least, you are going to surface up. You're going to see the people who are doing this or who it resonates with. They're going to rise to the top. And so think about what comes next. think about how you can leverage that population. We have this pilot that we're now running where we did invite the top participants to engage in this conversational AI pilot because we knew they are primed to engage in things and to try on new things and to give us feedback and who are going to give us good input into that new approach that we're taking. So I think that's incredibly valuable. And then starting there and building that snowball effect based

upon what you learn immediately, I would say. Think about that. Think about what happens after you do this and how you're going to use what you learn from it.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. How about yourself, Sydney? What would you add to that advice?

Sydney Cannon:
Yeah, I would definitely second knowing your audience and knowing cultural implications, but also subcultures or the different impacts of those subcultures on people's behaviour is important. It's hard to get to, but I think it's worthwhile to spend the time to try to understand it. And then yeah I think rewarding those people I mean Matthew kind of alluded to this yeah we have built, now we know this group of people that's engaged and we can engage them for other opportunities and what's next but also give them something exciting as well or give them a reward as well for that behaviour. I think that's incredibly valuable. You know, we all benefit when we can learn from each other. And so if people are giving you their time to give you feedback or give you time to use your learning platform or your learning offerings, I think it's well worth the investment to reward them in some way.

Michelle Ockers:
Thank you both for those insights. I will be interested to see what conversations and experiences sparks for others as we share this story. And I really appreciate your curiosity, your willingness to not only take some risks inside the organization, but to be generous in sharing what you're doing and where you're at and being willing to talk about that messy middle, right, as you figure this out and show your work so that others can learn from it as well. We'll pop a link to your LinkedIn profiles in the show notes so people can take a look and maybe reach out if they've got some questions. I really appreciate what you've done here in sharing your work.

Matthew Murray:
Thanks so much, Michelle. We really appreciate it also.

 About Learning Uncut

Learning Uncut are learning and development consultants that help Learning and Development leaders and their teams become a strategic enabler so that their businesses can thrive. We work in evidence-informed ways to drive tangible outcomes and business impact and are strong believers in the power of collaboration and community. We specialise in helping to build or refresh organisational learning strategy, update their L&D Operating Model, enable skills development, and conduct learning evaluation. We also offer workshops to shift learning mindset and practices for both L&D teams and the broader workforce – as well as speaking at public and internal events.

Learn more about us at our website.

About your host, Michelle Ockers

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

Michelle received the following prestigious industry awards in 2019:

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

Find Michelle on LinkedIn