

Michelle Ockers:

Welcome to another episode of Learning Uncut. I'd like to kick off, as always, by acknowledging the traditional custodians of country throughout Australia and their connection to land, sea and community, including those of the Brinja-Yuin people on whose lands I sit as we record this conversation. Welcome, Michelle.

Michelle Parry-Slater:

Hello, I am on the Kombumerri Lands today.

Michelle Ockers:

And for listeners, Michelle has a different role today. She is not hosting. She's one of our guests alongside Arnika Knight, who is the Learning and Development Manager of Girlguiding UK. Welcome, Arnika.

Arnika Knight:

Hi, thanks for having me.

Michelle Ockers:

It's lovely to have you here. This is an episode I've wanted to record for a while because you, Michelle Parry-Slater, have been talking to me. And there is also a little case study in your book about some of the work you did as the former lead volunteer of L&D at Girlguiding UK from 2017 to when was it that you handed over to Arnika?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

22, I didn't hand over, so I worked alongside. So how it works is that it's a volunteer led organisation. So we have volunteers, and I was volunteering. And I work alongside, I worked alongside staff members. So Arnika and I were doing kind of two sides of the same coin, really. And there were before Arnika joined Girlguiding, there were other fantastic people in that staff role as well. So we had a team of 16 at one point, and it was until I want to say 22, I ought to have checked. Five and a half years. Do the maths, listeners, do the maths.

Arnika Knight:

It's hard to remember the time, the past.

Michelle Ockers:

So a team of 16, that sounds interesting. That sounds like a not insignificant team size. So Arnika, can you briefly introduce Girlguiding UK and talk to us a little about what makes learning and development distinctive in a volunteer organisation of this scale?

Arnika Knight:

Sure. So Girlguiding UK, I think your listeners will probably be familiar with Girlguiding. Girlguiding operates all over the world, and we're all part of a kind of

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more international body, the World Association of Girl Guides and Girl Scouts, but each country will have its own individual sort of organisation. So Girlguiding UK was the original one. How many members do we have now? Maybe over 300,000. So yeah, a lot of around 80,000 volunteers, two to 300,000 girls, it's a lot. Yeah, a lot of people. And so we are sort of, I guess it's a very basic term, like an after-school club for girls and young women. We help girls know that they can do anything. There's lots of activities that are run, after-school things, trips, residential, camps, lots of skills development, huge amounts of different activities and organisation across the country.

For the UK, we're in all four countries, so Scotland, Northern Ireland, England and Wales, and I think we have 26,000 individual groups that are meeting weekly, so yeah, it's a huge operation and it's delivered all by volunteers. So we have a relatively small staff team, around 200 to 300 staff, I think, but then you are delivered really at every single level by volunteers, including all the management of volunteers, are managed by other volunteers, there's property, activity centres, campsites, they're all owned by volunteers, and so it's, yeah, it's a real voluntary-led organisation. And as Michelle said, we've got lead volunteers who work with us as staff. So we work sort of collaboratively on all areas of delivering the programme. So my role is specifically the learning and development for volunteers. So we also have a HR team for the staff and we have some L&D involved with the staff, but that's obviously at a much different scale, much smaller. And so our role in our team, we sit in a volunteer experience department. And so we're solely focused on volunteers and making sure they've got sort of the learning, the qualifications and the skills that they need to deliver all of the many, many things that happen.

So, that ranges from sort of leader development programmes. So, if you want to lead a unit, we have a programme that you can go through. If you want to take girls on residential, there's another programme they go through. So, they're like longer form learning programmes. And then we also have some more specialised qualifications like the walking qualification. We have a narrow boating qualification. So yeah, a huge range of different kind of internally developed qualifications. They're not accredited, but they sort of exist within the Girlguiding world. And we sort of write and deliver all the content for that and work also with a network of volunteer trainers as well, who deliver stuff more in person, locally and kind of meet the needs locally of their volunteers that they work with. So lots of different things.

Michelle Ockers:

So all of a sudden, a team of 16 doesn't actually sound sizable.

Michelle Parry-Slater:

So I think the team of six, well, I was going to say half of those were staff and half of those were volunteers. So, you know, when you think that that's eight people giving their extra discretionary time, it's probably even less than that in terms of full time equivalent hours.

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Arnika Knight:

Yeah, all of our teams at Girlguiding, we do have these equivalent teams, so we're really, I think we're really lucky in the L&D team. Particularly, we've got like, we always have a lead volunteer, which Michelle was in that role, and then we've got a different person who works on every single project, so they might have specialist skills in that area. So, good example, we run our own internal first aid qualification, and we have two amazing volunteers who run first aid training for NHS England. So they give all their time to help us develop content and advise on things and that kind of stuff. So yeah, the model is quite unique, but it means that we can kind of tap into some really incredible expertise and Girlguiding is full of amazing women doing amazing things, and so we're very lucky to have people that want to give up not just their time for weekly volunteering, but all of them will also come and work with us in the head office, which is always so nice because everyone has these important jobs, and I'm like, do you really want to come to these board meetings and write papers for us? But it turns out they do, so that's nice.

Michelle Ockers:

Well, I know one of the things we'll pick up on is this idea of tapping into volunteer motivation, but that's part of your story as well, Michelle, because you were the volunteer L&D lead from 2017. How did you get involved in not only being part of Girlguiding potentially, and I don't know a little bit of the backstory, were you part of Girlguiding already? Or did you get attracted somehow into the volunteer, the lead volunteer role for the L&D space? How did you connect?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

So when I set up Kairos Modern Learning in 2014, one of the missions was I had more time to give back. And so I wanted to volunteer and I wanted to volunteer at Guiding because my daughter was in Guiding, but she was in a different village. So I thought, well, if we set up guiding in the village, then, you know, great. I can hang out here with her. And so that's what we did. We reopened the unit, which had been actually the first unit in Hertfordshire when back in the day, but unfortunately it closed in 2000 due to lack of volunteers. So I'd not long been involved in girl guiding and I'd gone through the leadership qualification and it wasn't the best of experiences. Let's just put it that way. It was great, it was good, it was fine, and people were really helpful. I'd done girl guiding as a young person myself, so I had something to lean back on, but working in learning and development, you kind of can't not see that it could be better. And in 2016, they were looking at, well, what could we do differently? And held a focus group, which was a great example of how focus groups really work. You gather people who have got interest, who have recently gone through that learning, and they held this focus group. It was externally moderated and facilitated to gather information really. And so me being me trying to always be in service of our profession and offered some support and that translated into, oh, by the way, have you heard about lead volunteer roles? Which I'm like, well, what crazy person do you get to give up all that time? And up went my hand.

So it was a real honour and a privilege because people tended not to get those lead volunteer roles unless they'd been in Girlguiding for a long time. But it was at a time of a bit of shift. It was, Arnika's just described how you've got experts doing those

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roles. And that was really the direction of travel so trying to actually fill all of those lead volunteer roles and sort of specialist expert roles with people who were working in those areas and had that to bring in so it meant that the team that I led were fantastic learning and development professionals on that team, you know, really not just on the staff side, but on the volunteer side as well. And that it was just a wonderful team to be able to work with, because everyone had their little bit of niche, and always helped me to understand the bigger picture of Girlguiding, because, you know, it's been around for over 100 years. And so I didn't want to come in and, you know, just sweep everything away and do things differently, you got to be really respectful of the history. But there was a specific if you like, a business need, which was we had at the time about 110,000 volunteers and no real way of reaching them other than through 638 face-to-face volunteer trainers. So that was quite challenging geographically when you think about, you know, you're in the wilds of Scotland, you've got to drive miles to go to a two-hour training to drive back again, or you're in the wilds of Wales, you know, and you haven't necessarily got good internet. So what have you got? You know, you've got to drive. So we needed to sort of solve these problems.

Also, the more modern volunteer had a full time job. Whereas when Girlguiding was set up 100 years ago, you know, that wasn't necessarily the case. So there were real business challenges, if you like it, for want of a better phrase, that needed to be solved. And that's why the team was sort of pulled together to see how we could solve those problems with some more modern thinking when it came to L&D. But the first thing we did was to create a strategy which hugely respected where it had come from. And you mentioned about the case study written up in my book. And what we did for the strategy was we drew it rather than write it. And that was really important because we needed to very quickly plug into the minds of all of the different stakeholders, be they the very valuable 638 volunteer trainers, the 110,000 volunteers who were every week giving their time. And we were asking for extra discretionary time to do training. We needed to make sure that the chief guide and all of the board were very understanding and happy. And that image was a very strong road. We have come from a strong place. This is not fundamentally broken. This is just how do we get to the same goal through multiple routes. And that proved to be quite an easy way of people saying, oh, ok, well, I get it. I've still got a space. It didn't feel like slash and burn or huge change or any of those things. It felt that people could sort of navigate their way through. And of course, it also tapped into the fact that we like doing more reinterring and we like doing map reading and all of those kind of outdoor activities. So the image really did kind of sort of pull people together behind a new strategy for learning, which was multiple routes to the same goal.

Michelle Ockers:

So it's interesting to hear you talk about the cultural fit of the way you presented the image, the respect for the legacy and history of the organisation and honouring that, but also the fact that times had changed, the nature of the volunteer base had changed. And the idea of giving people multiple routes to find their way through the training that they needed to be able to work effectively as a volunteer, was that something new? Was there just one way of delivering volunteer training when you first started in the role, Michelle?

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Michelle Parry-Slater:

There was 95% one way, which was 638 face-to-face trainers. It was the only way that you could become a leader or do your going away with to go take girls on camp. There was only ever one way, which was in person. That had been the way for 100 years. And as I say, it wasn't necessarily broken, it just didn't reach everybody. And that was the problem. There were some, I'm casting my mind back, I think there were some e-learning back then.

Arnika Knight:

Yeah, there was a couple when I started, but you know, you'd already been around for a few years, Michelle, but we had, yeah, we had a few where they were being made externally. So we were using external companies to build stuff. Some of that early compliance training that sort of the entry level stages were done by e-learning. They were the first ones that came in.

Michelle Parry-Slater:

And they were expensive to change. That was another problem that we had that if we wanted to shift things needed to change all of the time. Our own context changed during the time of doing that, but I'm skipping ahead a little bit because obviously we had COVID, but we'll come back to that in a moment, I suppose. But that's the point, we needed to be more flexible.

Arnika Knight:

Yeah, and we did start off by having companies basically build all the stuff for us, which is, you know. Now, spoiler alert, we do it all with ourselves. So it's been a real shift in how we design training as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So you've spoken about reach. I was for a short period of time, a Girl Guide leader here in Australia when my daughter was involved with guides. And to your point, Michelle, about face to face training, That was about 13 years ago I was involved, just trying to do the mental arithmetic of how old my daughter is now and when she was involved. It's also a matter of convenience. As a volunteer, I was giving up my time to provide support and make a contribution. And I recall having to, you know, make childcare arrangements so I could go away for a whole weekend of face-to-face leader training. So there's something about, you know, a volunteer organisation around the motivation and people's time as well. I think that maybe plays into the choices that are available for their learning. Was that something you were conscious of addressing?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

100% conscious of that. It was very important. You know, you've got leaders who are coming home from a day at work, and then they've got their units and their unit might meet for two hours a week. But of course, that's not their volunteering time, they have to prepare and they have to make sure that they've done all the admin and the paperwork and the safety and all of that. So you're asking volunteers for extra discretionary time. You really need to respect that time. And it means that you can

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open your pool to a wider set of people other than people who've got the option to, you know, have childcare for a weekend. And I hear you, that was me when I did my going away with, which is sort of your camping license and the qualification for that. I had to also, you know, not just the kids, but the dogs, get them minded so it's important that we were giving volunteers choices, and that was really what the whole ethos behind multiple routes to the same goal.

Arnika Knight:

Yeah, and I think that is really important to mention about the choices, because we've seen this with some of our compliance training, which is now all online. I think it's like 95% of people access it via e-learning, but 5% of 80,000, it's still many thousands – well, hundreds, what is it? I can't do the maths, but it's a lot. So, even when you have small numbers who want to be able to do something face-to-face for various reasons, to be able to still offer that, and I think we really, while digital has solved a lot of problems, not solved a lot of problems, but offered that choice and a lot of people prefer it in some ways. Face-to-face and in-person is still such a really key part of our offer just because of some people's needs. Also, some people don't want to be at a computer all the time. That's not what I've signed up for guiding for. So yeah, being able to offer the choice and that is a real balance for us about where we put our time and effort into developing. As you probably, I'm sure, know, your listeners know that, you know, it's not just so easy making online and offline versions of everything. It can be twice as much work. So, but yeah, I think that's a challenge for our team as well to really consider like how we offer training for volunteers and what's the best thing for them.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So Arnika, as you listen to Michelle talk about the way things were back in 2016, 2017, and you think about the experience of a volunteer, their learning experience now in 2026, what do you think are the key things that would feel different if I was stepping into being a volunteer guide leader in terms of my development, my learning experience today versus 2017?

Arnika Knight:

Yes, I mean, I think we're definitely on a journey that will never end, but it's a big changes. We launched a learning management system in, I want to say 2021, I think. And so, one of our big aims for that was just to make learning available and accessible to volunteers so they can self-serve and find things themselves. So, as Michelle mentioned previously, it was all done through our network of trainers, who still play a really important and key role in delivering our learning. But a lot of our qualifications, they were all done kind of through books. It was quite difficult to just even find the book. Not everyone could buy the book. You had to know someone. And if you were maybe in a region that didn't have so many trainers or you didn't know somebody close to you, you might miss out on opportunities. So really what we wanted to do is make opportunities more visible and available to learners. So that's both e-learning and also the in-person options as well. I would hope now that volunteers can log into our learning platform and see a huge range of things that they can access. So, from various e-learnings, and if they want to sign up to a qualification, they can do that right there and then. They don't need to wait and find

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someone. I mean, even we in the office sometimes didn't know how you would sign up to do your leadership qualification, everything's very regional and some people do things in different ways. So now, you know, anyone can go and sign up. So we're hoping that things are just more visible and available. And we just have a growing back catalogue of e-learnings now, which, you know, is good, but also does need to take a lot of updating, which can be challenging. Yeah, and we're building a lot more stuff in-house, so we're a bit more flexible with how we do that to keep stuff up-to-date and things like that. So yeah, I think visibility is good. We also work with regional teams so they can put their own trainings on the platform. That is definitely a sort of work in progress. There's many levels of guiding. We've got our sort of country and region offices. So they have access now to add their own sessions to the platform. There's also county levels. We haven't quite got to the county level just because it gets more of the hierarchy. It gets bigger and bigger numbers of people. But I mean, the sort of ultimate dream one day is every single piece of learning that's available to volunteers is listed on the platform. And, you know, we're moving towards that, but not quite there yet.

Michelle Ockers:

Certainly sounds like visibility, access, that there is a lot less friction in the experience and a lot more choice. Michelle, as you hear Arnika describe 2026, what shifts feel most significant to you?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

I mean, there just was no visibility. So that's the biggest shift. But I think also the evolved work from those trainers, they're still very much involved. And I think it's one of the proudest moments of my career, really, that we managed to train, of those 638, over 300 of them in how to deliver live online. So even that was a step which meant people could access learning from their own home, rather than have to drive across county. So it was still instructor led learning, but instead of being in a physical classroom, it was in a live online classroom. And we did that training during around 2018-2019. And so to have a volunteer workforce who were prepared to learn something brand new, a new skill for them. And we were very fortunate to have that freely available to us, or cheaply available to us, I think it was, from the CIPD, which is a program that I wrote with Andy Lancaster, how to deliver successful webinars. And it meant that they were upskilled in something they could use in their private life as well. So these are people that were often involved in learning jobs. And so they were they were getting those skills from their voluntary job to then feed back into their private job, which was just wonderful as a as a payback for all of the hours that they were giving. And so we tailored that CIPD program that was a four week program with another couple of weeks for specifically for Girlguiding. And it meant that when the pandemic hit, we were more than ready. We were absolutely already ahead of the game. We obviously didn't know and hadn't predicted a pandemic, but it means that I think, well, I think two things came out of it. One, the willingness of the volunteers to upscale themselves. And there was a lot of worry initially that we would alienate that workforce as volunteers, because, you know, all the digital people are sending everything digital, which was never the case. It was more routes to the same goal and we were adding to not taking anything away. And so that was wonderful. The second thing I think that was really lovely was it showed that anyone at any

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stage of life can learn. You know, the volunteers are from 18 to 88. So there's no sort of, oh, this is a young person's game or any of that at all. It was everyone, you know, sort of signed up and piled in, which was great. It just means that you've just got more routes, more options, more choices. And that means that you can service a bigger population.

Arnika Knight:

Yeah, just the webinar thing, I think, like now, when I think about our compliance training, when Michelle started, it would have just been only in-person trainer-led. When the pandemic hit, we switched to, well, we couldn't do in-person, but we did webinar. And so then we kind of, in the end, we had a webinar version and then an in-person version. And now we've relaunched it as an e-learning. and we have an e-learning, a webinar trainer-led and then an in-person trainer-led. So now we have the three options for that, which is great.

Michelle Parry-Slater:

That's excellent. It's just how it should be because then people have got choice and then they're tapping into their intrinsic motivation as well.

Michelle Ockers:

So, Michelle, one of the things we saw in the early stages of the pandemic in particular was people picking up face-to-face courses and trying to run them in the same way in an online environment, a live online environment, which led to some pretty poor experiences for the learners and probably the poor old facilitators as well, trying to keep up the energy. So it was 2018, 2019, you're talking about training these 630 volunteers. I think over 300 of them, you said, were trained in delivering live online. So that wasn't all that long after you started working on the learning strategy. What was required to be ready for the volunteers to be trained? Because it's not just a matter of here, pick up what you're doing face to face and start doing it live online.

Michelle Parry-Slater:

That is a really interesting question, and I think preparing that mindset is a really important part of the journey. We did a lot of that preparation at board level. So as Arnika's explained, there's the 10 countries and regions and they've all got their chief guide and they all needed to come along on the journey as well. So there was the senior stakeholders that we had to engage. But from the trainers perspective, there was at that time, quite regularly, there were get togethers, there was a trainers conference. And so the year that I was responsible for hosting that, we really focused on mindset shift. So it's hard to conceive of a future if you've never lived it or experienced it or imagined it. So we helped that train a cohort to imagine a different future.

I went out to all of my buddies on Twitter and LinkedIn when Twitter wasn't the hellscape it is today. And just said, who wants to come and hang out with the Girl Guides for a weekend. And I had fantastic learning and development professionals or bringing stuff so that we could host a series of different workshops, and we had neuroscientists there, we had people who were you know, really well experienced in

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live online, for example, we had people talking about Lego serious play. We just had so many different sort of ways of thinking about learning and development that hadn't necessarily ever been exposed to trainers before. And it really did open some hearts and minds. And I remember very clearly, we put up a piece of flip chart paper. And we said, if anyone would be interested in learning how to deliver live online, then please sign up. And we end up having to put a second sheet of flip chart paper, and I just never in my wildest dreams imagine that people would be that keen because face to face is girl guiding like you being with the girls being in your unit, being with other adults making friends, that's girl guiding.

So I was really encouraged by how people were sucking up the learning and the opportunity. And that's why we ended up with 300. We were just, we just kept running and running and good on Andy Lancaster for sticking by me and doing, he did about 90%. And then Gary Cookson needs a shout out because he also did, he did a whole ton of those as well. So, you know, that's just one tiny example, but even you know people talking about neuroscience it just wasn't something that that girl guiding did or had the capacity to do for no other reason that you're asking you're asking volunteers to give extra time you're asking volunteers to give more by doing that learning and it that that's a tough ask of any voluntary organisation.

Michelle Ockers:

Anika, what is your reflections about the motivation of your volunteer trainers and how to tap into that motivation? Because there is a lot being asked of them.

Arnika Knight:

Yeah, I mean there's a lot being asked of all of our volunteers and it's really like it's very inspiring to spend time with groups of volunteers who just love Girlguiding and I think that's the thing is that all of our volunteers just a lot of them have grown up in guiding and they have such great experiences and so they just really want to sort of give back and they do yeah a lot of people do a lot of roles so our trainers are not just trainers they are often our commissioners which are our volunteer kind of manager levels there are mentors for different learning programs, there are unit leaders, there are probably unit helpers in somebody else's unit. I think often with our trainers there's people who've got a lot of knowledge, skill guiding knowledge and want to give back, but we also have a lot of people who work in L&D and in training as well in their professional lives. It's just a huge range of people. But I'd say at the heart of it all, it's people who love guiding and they want to give back and support others through. And you don't have to have 30 years experience in guiding to be a trainer at all. We all know great facilitators. You can deliver content. You don't have to be a subject matter expert. And I think we've got both.

And we've relaunched recently our it's called the Trainer Development Programme, which is our route into becoming a trainer. And part of the reason is that we actually want to make it more kind of open and available to all volunteers. So moving away from just because you maybe haven't had 30 years guiding experience, but we still want people like that to be trainers as well. So part of the motivation for the new TDP is to, I guess, open up, make it a bit more accessible, visible, like we said, to get a greater kind of range of different people. But yeah, generally our trainers are very

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engaged, which is great and really up for sharing their knowledge and supporting other volunteers through their guiding experience.

Michelle Ockers:

And do you still run the trainers conference that Michelle talked about?

Arnika Knight:

No, we used to do it every two years, but a lot of stuff shifted over COVID. Yeah, so we don't do so much kind of in person, those big large scale things as well. We do a few different, we do one sort of conference for our volunteer managers and some of our trainers are involved with that. but yeah at an HQ level we do less kind of in-person stuff but the regions do so all of our countries and regions I think they all do a sort of version of a trainers conference for their regional trainers and then some of the regions link up as well together and then we do more online stuff for our trainers so I think we do four online kind of support group meetings a year where we have everybody together where we try and offer some kind of learning opportunity some kind of new information that that type of stuff so you know I guess we're doing I think like many organisations, we've shifted to, I guess, less big one-off in-person things, but more frequent virtual-based events.

Michelle Ockers:

So Michelle, as you listen to Anika's talking about some of the things that have continued to evolve and maybe some of the things that are still being worked on, what are you most curious about? What do you want to ask Anika about in terms of that ongoing evolution and adaptation?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

It is one of the sad things in my life really that I had to give up my role. So in Girlguiding you are a lead volunteer for three to five years and I really respect that because that is to do with getting new voices and getting new ideas and that kind of thing. So that's why I had to leave after five and a half years. I got an extra half because of COVID. So Arnika, I haven't seen the rest of the story play out, which does make me sad, but I do feel happy that we've set something up. So I'm curious to know what hasn't continued. Is there anything about that? Is there anything that sort of, you know, we've, we tried and we ditched? I know we did a few experiments back in the early days, we did an experiment with filtered, for example, to see trial a chatbot, even before chatbots were trendy back then. But I wonder, is there anything that kind of hasn't continued?

Arnika Knight:

That is a good question. I think maybe less so that hasn't continued but maybe just our quite high ambitions for launching a LMS and then thinking like in the first year we'd have everything online and actually that has not happened and in January this year we launched, it's not actually even our final qualification, but it's our final main qualification out of book form onto the platform. We actually do have a few smaller ones, but you know this, I've lost track of time, but I mean it's three to four years basically of getting everything on the platform, and I think that maybe when we launched and some of the earlier stuff when you were around Michelle talked a lot

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about I don't know, like curating content, not just sort of making our own content, but how do we like bring in stuff. And actually that's something we haven't really done for various reasons. Our volunteers kind of like Girlguiding specific stuff. It's not so easy to like quality assure things. It's not as easy. And just the platform that we have just to have kind of like bits of YouTube videos and things, unless I kind of built into a more learning pathway. So I think that is something we would like to explore a little bit more is how we use existing content, existing programs, because our volunteers, like we were saying about the trainers, they have day jobs, and if we can upskill them in other things as well, that would help them for that, I think that'll be really good to explore. And there's lots of, for example, our volunteer managers, our commissioner levels, and we don't do a lot of stuff for them, but there's all these amazing leadership programs and things that we'd like to explore more. So yeah, I think that kind of content curation side of stuff would be good to explore more.

Michelle Parry-Slater:

It is slow, isn't it, the rate of change? And I think people might be listening thinking, oh, 10 years, that's, you know, what have you done in 10 years? But actually, it's uber fast when you put it in the context of a hundred year movement. It's been so, so fast.

Arnika Knight:

Yeah, and I think all organisations, you know, we're not unique in that, that COVID sped that up and we were just in an incredibly fortunate position because of all the work Michelle had done to sort of make us ready for COVID. And the team, not just me, the six people too. You know, we had all the trainers on board to deliver online training, but I mean, maybe not so many learners, but then we were kind of forced into, you know, we were still delivering girl guiding activities during COVID. It just, that all moved onto online. We still needed to, we had, you know, mandatory sort of safety and safeguarding training that we require all volunteers to do. So we had to find a way to deliver online. So, my team, definitely Vicky and my team worked many, many hours at the beginning of COVID to get our safeguarding training converted into a kind of webinar format to deliver it. So I think that definitely helped speed things up. But yeah, when I started this job, I was actually interviewed by my boss, who's the head of volunteer experience and by Michelle. So a lot of our staff roles are interviewed by volunteers. And Michelle described Girlguiding to me. It's not just, you're not just trying to turn a big ship, it's actually a flotilla of 26,000 little tiny ships and you're sort of trying to sort of cajole them down the river. And I think that is definitely true of Girlguiding, it's not, we're not one, it's not a big one organisation, it's many different, I mean it's like legally many different organisations, we're a huge group of actual individually registered charities, our country and region offices are quite significant organisations, they've got their own boards, they've got sometimes their own CEOs, So there's a huge range of different kind of people and to bring change is challenging. But yeah, it's slow, but I think, you know, you do get there in the end.

Michelle Parry-Slater:

So in that context, it is very fast.

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Arnika Knight:

I know 10 years, it does seem long, but then, and also the world has shifted, you know, because of COVID and because of different volunteers. And, you know, even 10 years ago, I think, yeah, it's just a different expectations. And we said it before, we've got new volunteers coming in and, volunteers, everyone's just people. We just have expectations of digital and the ease of doing things. you know, we don't always, I think, get that right. Digital systems at Girlguiding, we're a bit of an older organisation, sometimes our systems don't quite, they're not the newest, jazziest thing, but we're investing huge amounts of resources into making the digital journey, not just in learning, but for new volunteers. We've just launched a new recruitment tool for volunteers where they can look for different opportunities online. We've, yeah, got big plans, I think, to really revolutionise the volunteer journey to make it simple and easier and use digital systems in a way that's helpful not hopefully just causing people pain which sometimes I admit that our digital systems now are not quite you know, they're not world leading. We're not a tech company. We're just a volunteer company, but trying to make things easier.

Michelle Ockers:

So where have some of the friction points been and either of you over this sort of 10 year journey? And I know you're sort of saying it sounds slow, but it's kind of fast in an organisation with this history. We heard COVID accelerated things to some degree. But when you're trying to make change to your analogy, Michelle, about it's not one big ship trying to turn 26,000 or 80,000 or however many sort of small vessels you're trying to turn. Where are some of the friction points? What have you found has perhaps been unanticipated or even known, but it's just tricky to make change happen and how have you had to address those?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

So we initially had a lot of assumptions that would be becoming friction. So people were assuming that digital wouldn't be accepted in an organisation that had a volunteer workforce of 18 to 88. And I just picked those arbitrary numbers. I'm sure there are older people than 88. But there was an assumption that digital wasn't for us. And so what we did was we had to get an evidence base. So we did a lot of experiments around digital. I mentioned briefly earlier, we did one with filtered and that chat, but we just scraped information that was on the web and the Girlguiding website and fed it to a series of volunteers based upon their role and based upon what they were interested in. And without exception, everybody loved it. And so it proved that digital was not an age-related game at all. We did other experiments as well. We trialled initially one cohort in the webinar training to see if that was an option, you know, would people take to it? Was it easy to access the tools that we bought, which of course were sort of the cheapest tools on the market because we're a volunteer organisation. So there was a lot of evidence. We also did a lot of research outside of the organisation. So asking what other volunteer organisations were doing so that we could present it in a very solid business case way to ease that friction. Now, I'm curious to know, Arnika, what frictions still remain? What are you dealing with now?

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Arnika Knight:

I think the shift to digital learning is, when we only had face-to-face, quite a lot of people would raise issues around attending their face-to-face because it's, you know, the driving time, all these things, you know, they can't do it, takes too much time. So, then you introduce digital and then there's a load of issues that come up with digital. So I think that kind of any time, and you know, I've asked some people, they don't like to be online. So then you're like, okay, well, then we can offer this. And I think accessibility comes up quite a lot with our volunteers. And I think we want to make sure that we're providing learning that is accessible. And accessibility means different things to different people. And it's interesting that when we had only face-to-face training, people complained it wasn't accessible enough. Now we have digital. People like to complain that it's not accessible for various reasons. And so I think it's about trying to have that offer of different ways to get to the training. But that's not that simple in practice sometimes. I think particularly with our compliance training, because now so many people are doing it online, for those volunteers that might need a trainer-led version, just simply having the number of people to get them together, for example, to deliver that training isn't always that easy. So, yeah, it has presented some challenges with that. But, yeah, it is interesting the accessibility thing that it's shifted from, almost whatever you offer, it's not always going to meet the needs, I guess, for every single person. And we don't have the resources to provide, you know, three different options for every single piece of learning. Some things are digital only, and we as an organisation just kind of need to work out where we put our time and resources into helping the most number of people, but also making sure we're not leaving volunteers kind of behind that, you know, could do with some extra support.

But I think definitely having our volunteer trainers, their role has shifted in some sense because they're not delivering all of the training. They're probably delivering to small, sometimes smaller groups who maybe have different needs and that's kind of a bit of a shift. So, we're doing a bit more work with our inclusion team to try to upskill our trainers in those kinds of areas and working a bit more collaboratively with that. So, yeah, the training kind of has shifted a little bit. But then also, I think that in-person, and Michelle mentioned this before, you know, volunteers really value – well, we all do, I think – connections, and part of the reason why you're joining the guides is those kind of personal connections and meeting people. And sometimes, like, digital isn't always the answer, and actually, even though it is easier to log onto webinar for an hour, maybe people want to get together, half a day and chat and learn stuff from each other. So I think, yeah, digital is an answer for lots of things, but it's not the only answer and it's not that we want to get rid of our in-person kind of connections as much. And I think as we go forward in the future, it's trying to work out how we still maintain a place for both of those and what's the best use for in-person. So actually learning from each other and learning from your peers is a great thing to do for in-person training, where if you've got a lot of information and more process stuff, great, we can have some kind of videos and webinars and that kind of stuff. So yeah, I think as we go forward, it's just trying to keep all the options as much as possible, but then that's also quite a lot of work. Yeah.

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Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. You've touched on some important aspects of the culture of the organization and what attracts people to the organisation there, Arnika, in terms of belonging and connection. You know, have there been any unintended consequences, be they cultural or otherwise, of the shifts that have been made when you look at it over the kind of the 10 year period?

Arnika Knight:

I mean, has there been unintended consequences? I don't know. I'm sure if you asked a few people, like everybody's got a different answer for these kinds of things. I mean, I would hope that broadly it's positive, the consequences. But I think maybe what I mentioned just before is when I think specifically around compliance training, because that's all of our volunteers have to do that. And because, you know, for a large portion of volunteers, that's the only training they'll ever do with us is mandatory compliance training, which is fine. But that the role of the trainers has really shifted into more of an inclusion need now for volunteers who have additional needs, who maybe don't have digital access to things like that. And so actually, instead of now those trainers who might have previously been delivered every single week, a half a day safeguarding in-person session, now it might be more like two to three people who need additional support and might have complex and high-level needs. And how are those trainers actually prepared for that? And how can we help them through that. So that's been something interesting that has come up since we relaunched the compliance training a bit over a year ago. That is definitely a bit of a shift, I think.

Michelle Parry-Slater:

I think there's something I noticed in the time that I was in that role, which was a different attitude towards staff. And you probably didn't notice this, Arnika, because you came in a little bit later, but staff back then were there to work for or with the volunteer workforce. And that's definitely a shift. that I could never have done what we did by myself. It was a team effort. And whether we were staff or volunteer didn't make any difference to me at all. We were all in this together. And that's very much how it is in Girlguiding, certainly on a local level, you know, different people will support. And if I didn't have a helper, then our brownie helper would come and help me. And so there's a real connected culture. But from a head office level, there was sometimes a little bit of a them and us kind of thinking. And that seems to have shifted. I don't know because I'm not obviously in that space anymore 10 years on. But that was part of the driver to ensure that we were working more collaboratively as an entire staff. And, you know, staff were not diminished in any way in their roles because that was their full-time career. That was their job. That was, you know, and some of the staff that were in the team have gone on to do great things in learning in other charities as well, which is, you know, I'm really proud to We're not so keen on those that we lost to the Scouts, but we're all friends. I think cultural shift has been a result of this longitudinal experience.

Arnika Knight:

Yeah, we definitely, we have a like, call it a one team approach at Girlguiding, which is kind of a new sort of way that we were trying to approach things. And I don't think

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it's unique to organisations who, you know, I worked for a previous charity where we, I worked in head office and we had 10, I think we had 10 regional offices. And it's, you know, I think anyone who's worked in that kind of setup knows that there's always, there can be some friction between head office versus regional teams.

Michelle Ockers:

I don't think this is unique to the charity or not-for-profit sector.

Arnika Knight:

Big news.

Michelle Ockers:

So this has really been kind of an exploration of an ongoing evolution of learning, a huge shift over a period of 10 years. So if you had to distil kind of two or three lessons between you for what it takes to sustain that kind of ongoing evolution in learning in an organisation, what would your key lessons be? And I don't mind who kicks off if you want two each, one each, a shared one.

Arnika Knight:

I think my lesson is really just around the digital side adds to, but not takes away. And it's really still important to, even though we might have a digital learning programme, you know, we still have mentors and actually a person's experience of going through something really can be, yeah, the mentor, the mentor relationship is like really key to that, that we have to have, still have trainer led and in-person options for those people who need it. And it's not just a sort of one size fits all. And I think we sometimes get excited, I definitely do, by new shiny digital programs and systems that it's not, yeah, there's some core fundamental bits of learning and around those kind of connections and human sides of stuff, which are still really, really important.

Michelle Parry-Slater:

I think for me, it's the, we built this whole thing, this whole shift, this whole change, this whole new way of thinking about learning and development on a very strong strategy that respected where it had come from. There was no disrespect to anybody that was in that trainer space. And it started with a really strong vision for what we were trying to build. And that meant that we had that map. We physically had the image as well as the narrative that went alongside the image. So everyone got on board and that just made the whole thing so much easier. People were very excited. I remember attending board meetings and, you know, when is it happening? When is it happening? This is so exciting. We're so glad that we've got this. But at first, it wasn't like that. It was suspicion and like, whoa, this is different. And so really leaning into that whole emotion of the change journey. And I think when it comes to learning and development in the current age, we are change agents. This is what we do. We do behaviour change, but we are changing cultures, we're changing hearts and minds. And if you can help people see the vision, if you can help people see the image, then it just makes it a lot easier. So I would definitely encourage people to be clear on what they're trying to build rather than just run after the shiny stuff. So we held on from all the shiny stuff.

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Michelle Ockers:

Yes. So that image you're talking about the idea of the visual presentation of your strategy. I really liked that idea, Michelle. And I know that that is an image in your book. Is that something you think we might be able to share in the show notes?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

Yeah, well, we'll find a way.

Michelle Ockers:

We'll find a way. OK, so Arnika, as we close out, then what's next for volunteer learning at Girlguiding?

Arnika Knight:

We've launched so many things the last few years, the last big one being in January. And this year, I was like, no new launches. Let's just try to improve things. We've learned so much around how to make our learning platform really work for us rather than kind of retrofit stuff onto it. Sometimes we make things overly complicated. I think our more recent launches of programs have just been really great and smooth. It's just about trying to embed stuff that we've done, improve some of the earlier things that we've done, make things clean and simple for volunteers. And that's, yeah, no more big launches is my mantra for the year.

Michelle Ockers:

Tidying up what you've got and making it clean and simple. I love that. So listeners will share links to LinkedIn profiles for Michelle and Arnika. Arnika, do you have a LinkedIn profile to share?

Arnika Knight:

Yes, I do. I can.

Michelle Ockers:

Beautiful. And we'll see what other resources we're able to share with you. I do want to put in a big thank you here to our Learning Uncut producer of the last, oh, I want to say around three years, Jessica Gorke, who also happens to be my daughter. I've appreciated all of her support with the podcast over the past few years and wish her all the best as she goes off on her big backpacking journey around Europe and Asia, world events allowing, of course. So thank you very much, Arnika and Michelle, for the conversation today and sharing this long term journey for Girlguiding UK.

Michelle Parry-Slater:

Thank you.

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