

LEARNING UNCUT EPISODE 31

LONG LIVE LEARNING PT2 – LIV WILSON AND KERRY PEGUERO

Michelle Ockers: Welcome to another episode of Learning Uncut. I'm Michelle Ockers.

Karen Moloney: And I'm Karen Moloney.

Michelle Ockers: Today, we're welcoming back Liv Wilson and Kerry Peguero from Spark NZ. In our last episode, Liv and Kerry spoke about the big shift from training to learning that's underway at Spark, over the past two years. If you haven't listened to part one, I would recommend you go back and listen to part one because there is a lot of foundations laid for the things we're going to discuss today in part two of this story.

In part one, we heard about how they've increased ownership of learning by individuals through changing their approach to content, and in particular, we talked about user-generated content and also, the shifts in their induction program, and people being set up now to orienteer or do more self-directed learning or discovery, to be going through the induction program. Today, in part two, we're going to discuss accreditation and the use of technology. Welcome back Liv and Kerry.

Kerry Peguero: Hello again.

Liv Wilson: Hi.

Michelle Ockers: Okay. So, let's start with accreditation, which, Liv, I believe you're going to kick off talking about today. Lots of organisations put accreditation or certification in place, lots of organisations have defined pathways to move through those accreditation programs but you've done it a little bit differently, and I think one of the things that sets your approach apart is the link that you've created between your accreditation and business outcomes. So, can you explain for us how you define business outcomes and walk us through this linkage between outcomes, content and activities in your accreditation programs, Liv?

Liv Wilson: Yeah, of course. So, accreditation was formally launched in the business about seven months ago but there was a lot of significant amount of work that was done prior to achieve this outcome. What it started with is, we started thinking about with our customers changing so much and with the business changing so much, and the ever-changing evolution of the workforce that we find ourselves in, we really needed to get some consistency. So, we asked our agents, our customer-facing people what do they need out of working here, what do they actually want to achieve, and there were some really clear messages that came through. So, transparency on salary, career pathways, and definitions of what good look like and how they could measure themselves against that.

As most people know, they do work well together, so if you can align performance with salary expectations and career possibilities, then you've got yourself a pretty robust accreditation framework. So, we worked really

closely with the business to figure out what does good look like, what are the business deliverables, each customer-facing channel ... So, we have several different contact centres. We have retail store networks, we have back office type roles. Each of those roles has a set of core business metrics that if an agent completes those to certain standards, that's good. And so, let's pay them a good salary and let's recognise the fact that they're doing well, they're performing their job.

And then, at the same breath, if they perform a little bit better against the metric, then let's pay them a little bit more. And if they perform better again, then let's pay them more again, and let's look at it from a consistent, holistic approach. So, if you're performing at that high level for a longer period of time, then you're more likely to get paid the high level. It's a really fair, really transparent way to look at rewarding your people for their performance.

Michelle Ockers: That's an amazing level of transparency. So, obviously, to take that kind of approach, it's not just learning function, working alone, that there are other people you would've had to work with and create a shift to more transparency. Who did you have to work with and what sort of decisions needed to be made to create this?

Liv Wilson: Think everyone was on-board, and when I say everyone, the leadership function of those customer-facing, they're on-board with the journey and what was needed to be done because it came from their team, it came from the groundswell of we need this. And so, the learning enablement team were like, "Well, let's build it." The lot of crunching the numbers, the financing team certainly has to get involved as soon as pays time's getting involved. But HR team, in terms of contracts and salaries, and negotiations like that, and making sure we consider pretty much everything about empowering and paying out people for their performance. And a lot of workshops with agents, a lot of talking with them to make sure that it was fair and reasonable to expect that level of performance.

Michelle Ockers: So, it's a complex change, and so, you have to have good business reasons to adopt the approach as well, right? So, what got this decision over the line, apart from just, hey, our workforce want this? What were some of the other key considerations that led you to adopt the approach?

Liv Wilson: From reflection, it's literally because we couldn't keep operating the way we were. As a telco, we started out as a state-owned enterprise, so we had people who were agents who have been in this seat, we're talking about being in the seat for periods of 20 years plus, who were getting paid vastly different compared to people who had just walked in the door, arguably, with even more experience and customer outcomes. Really, it all centred around the customer. So, for us to be an amazing telco and to have the vision to help all of New Zealand win big in a digital world, to really believe that and to really encourage our people to believe that, then we needed to do this. We needed to keep the customer at the centre of everything we did.

Michelle Ockers: So, you've looked at what good looks like in terms of defining KPIs or outcomes but then, in terms of what behaviours lead to those KPIs or outcomes, that's another important component of accreditation. What does good look like? So, people need to know what sort of actions they need to do to create that outcome. How did you go about figuring out what behaviours people needed to be using in order get the outcomes that were going to be rewarded in this pay for performance environment?

Liv Wilson: So, the behaviours aren't part of the framework itself. So, the framework is very clear - metrics. These are the things, the outcomes that we're expecting. This is where it all links together with what we previously talked about, behaviours come from the curiosity and the mindset, and doing the best for the customer that we get through our onboarding and induction program. And as well as that, we've gone through a fundamental capability build for every customer-facing leader about how to have those robust coaching conversations with your people.

So, if they are not performing to a particular metric. It's time for you as a leader to get really curious about that and to support them to achieve. So, yeah, everything pretty much happened at once, in terms of launching the framework, upskilling our leaders and building a new induction onboarding platform that encouraged this behaviour with the customer at the centre of everything.

Michelle Ockers: Right. So, what does an accreditation pathway look like, then? So, we've got a framework with KPIs and people being measured against those, and rewarded against those, but we do have some sort of accreditation pathway as well.

Liv Wilson: Yeah. So, everyone, if you're candidate and you achieve the basic level, then you've got a lovely little bronze badge that you can wear on ... We've got lanyards around our necks, and you get a certificate and you get rewarded for being bronze. Once you have silver or gold, it starts to recognise the fact that you're really adding value to our customer experience, so doors start to open across the business.

So, if you're silver or gold, then you'll be eligible to apply for different roles around the company, to work in some of our more Agile-heavy customer, journey type, mapping squads and tribes. If you're silver and gold, that's where you're expected to help lift the capability of your bronze and below colleagues, so you can start to get into coaching and supporting them. So, the pathway is about you as an agent. Once you hit a certain level, then let's support you to achieve everything you want to.

Michelle Ockers: Okay. So, let's say I'm a bronze and I've been a bronze for a little while, and I'm trying to hit silver, and I know what the outcomes are in terms of the performance outcomes I need to exhibit but I'm struggling to get there.

Liv Wilson: That's where-

Michelle Ockers: How do I get there? What do I do? Who's going to help me? Where do I go?

Liv Wilson: So, that's where your leader comes in and also, that's where our learning platform, Ako, comes in. So, Ako is something that's bespoke, it's something we built in-house. Nobody else has it, it's ours and it is basically, a platform where, as you're achieving at a certain level but you want some extra support or you want to connect with people who are absolutely performing at the next level, then it will make those connections here.

Michelle Ockers: So, I'll get some recommendations, maybe I'll have a conversation with my leader, I'll get some recommendations out of Ako about who I could maybe connect with or what content I could undertake. Is it a matter, then, of me going away and doing something? What sort of activities would I be directed to do, to get better at my work?

Liv Wilson: A lot of it comes down to the conversation with the customer. So, the core metrics that we measure people on are the Net Promoter Score, digital activation, these are just examples. The repeat calls that Kerry mentioned in the previous podcast. So, if you actually practice your conversation, if you actually listen to the customer and meet their needs, and have that relationship with them, more often than not, your performance will lift. It's all about the customer.

Michelle Ockers: Okay. So, how do I get feedback on those conversations, then?

Liv Wilson: Feedback from the conversations are done in various ways. If you're in a store, then you'll get feedback through ... We have coaches in stores and we also have leaders in stores. Everyone's expected to coach, so you'll get feedback through that. If you're on a contact centre, then your team leader or your main leader, or capability coach will be listening to calls and providing feedback there as well.

Michelle Ockers: Okay. So, a lot of it is around coaching and conversation, by the sound of it.

Liv Wilson: Just a little bit.

Michelle Ockers: And me having the appetite to go and do something to get better.

Liv Wilson: That's right.

Michelle Ockers: Okay. It feels, Karen, like the technology platform is a big part of this, as well as understanding how I can access content that's relevant to my need, depending on where I'm at with the levels. So, let's take a look at the technology element of the strategy.

Karen Moloney: So, Liv's already mentioned that your system is called Ako. Can you just explain where that name came from?

Kerry Peguero: Intense debate. We opened it up to Spark because Ako, despite the fact that we've created it as a team, we don't own it. We wanted the people who are using it to own it. Part of that was you name it. This is your learning platform, you name it. So, through a process of what do you think our new learning platform should be called, and for a long time, it was called the

anti-LMS because of a slight disdain for some of the alternatives that are available in the marketplace at the moment. Ako came about because it's part of our native language and it means to learn. It's a shortened version akoranga. And so, it was part of our sense of identity.

Karen Moloney: So, you had actually, not just one LMS in your organisation. You had several, and none of them could service the needs or anything out in the market, could service the needs of what you wanted to be able to achieve for your learners. So, taking this anti-LMS approach and building your own platform was a very bold move. But what was it that you needed the technology to do, that existing systems out there couldn't?

Kerry Peguero: Because a lot of the existing systems work with it, understanding about it, has somebody completed a learning, it doesn't have that insight into ... It doesn't have that ability to plug into what the business outcome of that learning is. So, we couldn't find anything that was going to do that for us, anything that was going to connect to the other myriad of systems that we use, anything that was going to encourage the behaviours that we were hoping to unlock in our people. So, we had to go and build it.

Karen Moloney: Fair enough. So, how did you go about that?

Kerry Peguero: That's where the innovation part of our team ... So, the learning innovation squad that we have are a bunch of people who ask really, really messy questions like what if something could do this?

Karen Moloney: I like those ones.

Kerry Peguero: Yeah, and what's even more interesting is that they, then, go and try, and prove that they can't do it, and sometimes they by-product does that they have done it.

Karen Moloney: The fun of innovation. So, what are the core elements of functionality in Ako?

Kerry Peguero: So, again, to talk about the anti-LMS, it's designed with the user in mind, that I should be able to go in there and find content that's relevant to me. Not that you are going to serve me what you think I should do and what the business is asking you to do, that I have visibility of my accreditation framework and how it is that I'm tracking, in terms of my performance. Where my areas of opportunity are, where my strengths are. So, it also becomes a recognition tool as well, and where I've got areas of opportunity, it makes recommendations about what your next course of action could be. It's personalised because it takes all of this data from all of these different parts of the business and serves it up to you in something that's incredibly user-friendly.

And it's user-friendly because we've consulted with our people at all of the stages of build. We've done an enormous amount of workshops. We're up to phase beta now, where we're delivering on things that people have asked for, the iterations that they said, "This would make it even easier for me to

use. This would make a difference to my performance. This would make my job easier."

Karen Moloney: Yep. And so, just to get into that a little bit more, so Ako uses machine learning functionalities. Can you just explain what that is and how it works, to be able to service your needs?

Kerry Peguero: So, when we developed accreditation and when we've been working with induction and what have you, we've been really clear to understand what the business measures, what the behaviours are that somebody needs to demonstrate to achieve those business measures. Then, the content has been mapped against those KPIs. So, we've tagged all of our content with those behaviours, with those KPIs, with those frameworks. It then feeds in the information about their performance, so all of the reporting that we do as normal business operating factors, and it relates to ... So, for want of a bigger term, if I'm performing at silver for a specific KPI, it recognises that and because of the tagged content, it will give you recommendations of what you can consume in order to lift your performance.

Karen Moloney: Okay. So, what sort of reporting, then, do you get out of the system? How are you tracking what's going on for people?

Kerry Peguero: So, the other big change with this, we haven't purposely made it reporting-heavy. It's designed with dashboards, for individuals to be able to view their performance and the next iteration is of their team leaders, to be able to view their people's performance. Rather than generating reports and managing your people off a report, they've got visibility of their own performance, to own themselves. And that's where we start driving those behaviours of, where I can see where it is that I'm performing, I can see what my opportunities are. I have some that are made available to me but then, I can start conversations with other people about what more I could do or what I could do differently.

Karen Moloney: And that really hands the accountability for learning back to the learner and allows them to really take their career in a way that they want to, as opposed to them deciding in a performance session, so what would you like to do in the next 12 months? And then, let's put you on some courses to do that. It's a very responsive way for people to be managing their career, managing their learning.

Kerry Peguero: Yep, absolutely. The other thing that it does is that, through accreditation there is transparency, the rest of the business has access to this information as well. They can see who those top performers are, and they become a point of reference. For when we are trying to improve a customer journey, these people are providing amazing customer experiences. Those are who we, as the back-up, back of house, the engine of Spark, need to go and talk to, to get insights.

Karen Moloney: So, I can see Michelle's scribbling some questions down here, that she's itching to ask you a couple of questions, Kerry. So, I'll hand back over.

Michelle Ockers: So, one of the somethings we sometimes hear about is that some organisations are shifting away from structured annual performance reviews and very rigorous cycles around performance management. It feels what you created is not just an approach to learning but an approach to performance improvement and performance management, which potentially does away with the need for annual reviews because it's more continuous. Are you seeing that happening more, Kerry, almost being manageable on a continuous basis through the structures you've set up and the approach you've set up?

Kerry Peguero: We absolutely are because of the business rules that have been built into accreditation. The review period is every three months the data is examined. And people's ability to move between the levels of accreditation, the accreditation steps is reviewed on a three month cycle. Because, again, to the business rules that were created, their performance needs to be sustained over a period of time before somebody is eligible for that move, for want of a bigger way of explaining it.

So, what that means is that people have this absolute visibility, so absolute clarity about what they're measured against and exactly how they're performing. It's not a question of why didn't I get there? It's a question about what I can do to get there. So, it changes a lot of the conversations that our leaders are having with our people. It becomes much more future focused and it's much more solution focused. It's less of the, somebody else got a promotion and I don't understand why. And so, I can actually see what their performance is and I've seen what they've been doing, and I've got an opportunity to emulate that, so how can I replicate that for myself?

We've been really deliberate. Another business reason for us having accreditation is that it was growing our own talent pool for Agile back of house. Acquiring talent for a business is an expensive thing to do and we actually need skills that aren't available in the marketplace. So, we're actually getting really deliberate about growing people with those capabilities and skills in-house, to then, go and join our Agile-heavy. We're becoming an employer of choice because we've got these really clear pathways to how people can move through into other parts of our business.

Michelle Ockers: Look, in terms of employee engagement, employee development, in terms of integrated HR and talent systems, and cultural shift, what you've done here is so much bigger than just change the approach to learning. It really is, I think, a model of creating a learning culture and being really responsive, and adaptive to the pace of change.

Liv Wilson: I think it's really worthwhile calling out that one of the metrics for our leadership or actually a couple of them are about how you, as a leader, engage with your people. So, your accreditation framework is on the one-on-ones and how frequently you have them and also, the effectiveness of those, so it reports back.

Michelle Ockers: So, one of the things we haven't spoken about in either part one or part two, is about your learning team and the role of learning and development

as you go through these changes, and into the future. We have talked briefly about the fact you've got your learning innovation squad and you've also got the enablement and learning, partnering branch. Are they the two main branches or are there other roles within your learning function?

Kerry Peguero: No, that's how our team's set up. We have the learning innovation squad who do most of the work surrounding the development and the iterations of Ako. And then, we have our learning partner branch who, largely, are embedded in the channels and who are more relationship focused. We connect to the innovation team to phase what we're hearing from the channels and what those opportunities are.

Michelle Ockers: Okay, and was that the structure you had in place when you started these changes two years ago or did you restructure as part of making the changes?

Kerry Peguero: No. Actually, we recently restructured. So, just as little what, two months ago, it would've been Liv?

Liv Wilson: Yeah, two months ago. But I think the structure beforehand was still fundamentally the same, just a slightly different reporting lines.

Michelle Ockers: Okay. So, out of these two, how has the role of the team changed and what further changes are you expecting?

Kerry Peguero: So, probably one of the biggest things has been for us, that shift from being a cost centre and something that Spark just had to wear, to a team that's seen to add continuous value, to the point that our demand at times, probably exceeds our capacity.

Liv Wilson: Definitely exceeds capacity at times.

Michelle Ockers: In terms of what you do then, the demand for what? Have the things you do or the typical tasks, or activities that are done by the team, shifted?

Kerry Peguero: It's a big chunk of our business but it's not the whole of our business. Other arms within Spark have been watching what it is that we've been doing and they want us to roll the ability out to them as well, too. The bits that Liv was talking about, where we've spent a lot of time and effort on our leadership and their development, and their ways of working, that's also something, the other parts of the business and also external to Spark, are getting really curious about. The leadership development and the focus that we've placed on there, and the support that we've wrapped around our people, to be able to grow into these roles. We've been very, very deliberate about not having a place for managers in our business, that we need leaders, and that's what our people deserve.

Michelle Ockers: So, a big focus on leadership development. If there's other people in learning functions, other learning leaders listening to this podcast and they're thinking, "Well, if I want to make this kind of shift, there probably are some mindset changes I need to make in my team." What would be the

key mindset changes you think are necessary to build this kind of more self-directed learning culture versus more traditional approaches to training/learning?

Liv Wilson: I think it's the same mindset that we're wanting to curate in our agents and in our users. That real curiosity mindset. We might be learning experts and goodness knows in the team, we do have a lot of learning expertise, but we don't have all the answers about how people run the business and they're our customers. So, we should start to treat them with that little bit of respect. Our place sits within the business and we challenge with curiosity, and we are there to enable people to be amazing. We're not there to make them be amazing.

Michelle Ockers: Okay, so curiosity is the biggest mindset shift that you're suggesting people need to adopt. What about skills? What changes have been necessary in the skills within the learning team.

Kerry Peguero: Look, I probably want to go a slight step further with what Liv was saying, in addition to curiosity, it's the growth mindset. So, we haven't come as a perfectly formed team to be fair. There were people who weren't used to this way of working. In fact, none of us were, and we didn't start becoming used to it until we started doing it. So, it's a case of not yet but it's the desire to learn, and to learn by doing. All that we have achieved has been by giving it a go and seeing what happens. We haven't thrown all caution completely to the wind and it does sound a little bit like that at times, and we have had conversations with people who've gone, "That's just not possible in our organisation."

But we, literally, have been changing four engines on the plane while it's been in the air. You, realistically, can't do one of these strategies in isolation because as we've been talking, you've seen how they all impact on each other. But I think the biggest thing is being really, really clear about what your intention is, and our intention is really clear and it's really simple, is to help people be amazing at what they do and what they want to do. It's not for us to drive it. We are enablers.

Michelle Ockers: So, it's about enabling rather than controlling, potentially?

Kerry Peguero: Absolutely. There's a phrase that gets used in our team an awful lot, which is the democratisation of learning. In theory, what we're all hoping to do is to do ourselves out of a traditional job. A big part through the development of Ako is that there should be something that we have started, we've given the seed the right environment to grow in but very soon, there should be a time where we can step away and we're not having to support the development of content or curate the development of content, where our role is evolved in something that's even further from traditional learning and development.

Michelle Ockers: So, what is that end state when you think ahead to maybe two years down the track? What is the role of the learning team then?

Kerry Peguero: It's a really good question.

Liv Wilson: It's a big question. I'm not too sure if it will be two years down the track but I really like the thought from Kerry, that effectively, we should be doing ourselves out of a job. I don't want it to be two years away because of personal, selfish reasons but I would like to think it's not too far away.

Michelle Ockers: So, increasingly self-sustaining the whole eco-system, if you like.

Liv Wilson: Yeah. We-

Michelle Ockers: Yeah.

Liv Wilson: Traditional L&D, sometime, is a bit of roadblock. We need to get out of the way and let people do what people do. And I think it probably also goes to the point of L&D becoming more that trusted advisor and helping enable people, and providing the support and the frameworks that are required, as opposed to generating and saying how people consume the content to learn.

Kerry Peguero: Exactly. We shouldn't be so prescriptive.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah, I agree.

Kerry Peguero: It's certainly something I've learnt in my time here.

Michelle Ockers: So, if you're interested in really linking learning to business outcomes, what are some of the tips you give people to get started with that?

Kerry Peguero: It's about L&D developing business acumen, would be probably one of the things that I would say. Get curious about how your business works and what their measures of success are, outside of learning content. What it means to their customers, what they define as successful. When they have to go to their board of directors and then, measuring whether they've had a successful year or not, how it all falls back from that. Because if you can get to that level of detail and that level of clarity, then that's your baseline for building your framework off.

Michelle Ockers: Again, the curiosity comes up. Liv, is there anything that you would add to that, in terms of tips for improving focus on business outcomes?

Liv Wilson: No. I think Kerry nailed it with that but I think another thing is our innovation squad, in particular, have really had to lift their capability and lift their skills in software because Ako was bespoke, and because it's being developed for us by us. If that's something you're interested in, then start lifting your capability in software development and things like that now. Even if you're not doing the building yourself but to be able to have the conversation with the developers who are doing the building, that would be an invaluable skill.

Michelle Ockers: Okay. So, we are going to include a link to Kerry and Liv's LinkedIn profiles if anyone would like to follow up about any of the topics we've spoken about in the last two episodes. There's so much there that we could've continued

to dig into, so please contact them direct if you're interested. Thank you so much, Liv and Kerry, for sharing your work and your insights with us.

Kerry Peguero: Thanks for having us.

Liv Wilson: Thanks Michelle, thanks Karen.

Michelle Ockers: And for our listeners, as always, we welcome ratings and reviews. The more we get feedback, firstly, the more we can improve and also, it does mean that the podcast is available to more learning professionals. So, we would really like to the stories out from guests such as Liv and Kerry today. Thank you.