



A Bullseye for Learning

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 430

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:00] Providing learning paths, offering valued credentials, and aligning with employer needs—each of those three activities is powerful on its own. But the combination of the three is even more potent and a bullseye we believe it's worth learning businesses aiming for.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:20] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:21] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:30] We often tout the importance of impact. It's one of the three goals we believe are at the heart of most learning businesses: reach, revenue, and impact.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:38] And we believe that that critical impact piece is broad, meaning ideally your learning business, through its products and services, is delivering significant and relevant results for learners, yes, and also for the organizations that employ those learners and for the fields, professions, and industries those learners work in.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:00] We want to offer one approach to making sure you're providing relevant results in today's episode, number 430.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:08] Before we get to that approach, let's talk about the context because we believe it's important to understand the context.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:15] Indeed it is. The world and, by extension, the employment market that all of those learners we're serving are working in have evolved tremendously in recent years. You can think about all of the digital transformation initiatives that you hear about, the rapid expansion of artificial intelligence and automation particularly recently, the dynamics of global trade—those are just a few of those big-picture items that are the tip of an iceberg that has so much underneath it.

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Celisa Steele: [00:01:47] All of that has contributed to a growing focus on reskilling, upskilling, and general workforce development.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:55] Indeed. You hear lots of buzz, still, about those terms: reskilling, upskilling. They've been out there for years, but they're not going away. We keep hearing about them. General workforce development. The importance of lifelong learning. And we're now, I think, starting to see more and more of a demand for more targeted and more sophisticated approaches to all of that adult education and training that needs to be going on, that we know needs to be going on.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:23] The money being spent on the adult education, training, and learning that we know needs to happen, that's big money.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:31] It is indeed. If you look at, say, the Association for Talent Development (ATD) *2023 State of the Industry* report, the average organization is investing about US\$1,220 per employee.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:48] In the U.S., the amount of state funding allocated to workforce development more than doubled between 2011 and 2020.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:57] We'll stay in the U.S. here for just a minute. At the federal level, it's not growing at the same rate, but there's still big investment at that federal level—US\$30 billion annually.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:08] In workforce development.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:10] Workforce development, yes.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:11] And then, if we broaden our lens even more and look at the global continuing education market, that's been valued by some sources at US\$33.6 billion in 2022 with projections for tremendous growth, so that it would be US\$58 billion by 2030.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:31] These are just some of the figures that are out there. You can come up with a lot of them. But big numbers are suggesting major and growing focus on ensuring that adults are prepared for productive careers and are supported in learning throughout their working life.

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Celisa Steele: [00:03:48] We believe that learning businesses have a major role to play in this situation, to play in supporting those adults throughout their working life.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:58] Indeed, we do. That's partly because employers can only provide so much of the training and learning that's needed out there.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:09] Right. They can and probably should provide some of the training that's needed. We're seeing evidence that employers are starting to think of themselves as longer-term professional development providers for their employees. They're really taking that on as part of their identity.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:24] They are indeed. We're seeing academic institutions do that as well. But there're topics that can and should come from outside sources, and learning businesses that focus on a particular field or industry—as many associations do, for example—are a natural partner and major player in providing the needed education and training.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:46] Those learning businesses, along with the employers, operate in what we characterize as the third sector of education. If you think about the first sector being a K-12 education (really pre-K-12), then you have the second sector being higher ed for that subset of folks who move on after high school and take some college. But then we have this third sector that needs to serve adult learners once they leave the formal academic education setting and begin work and continue to live. And they are going to have a long working life. In many cases, it might be several decades. We've called it the "other 50 years" at times.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:27] Yes, it's a time now to step back and figure out what really works in serving those other 50 years, that third sector. If you are a learning business, and you're thinking about supporting these lifelong learners, you're thinking about supporting the organizations that they're working for, you're thinking about supporting the fields and industries that they are a part of, what's the approach to doing that effectively? And when we look at our research and combine that with decades, at this point, of consulting experience with a wide range of organizations, we're seeing more and more that successful learning businesses are starting to center their strategies around employment market needs broadly in a way that serves employers, a way that serves the learners themselves, in ways that serve the broader industry with more clarity than we've seen in the past. We can talk a little bit about what our data and what our experience are showing at this point.

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Celisa Steele: [00:06:25] That gets back to impact that we opened with—that idea of aligning around employment market needs. It’s going to help ensure that the results that you’re helping to deliver as a learning business are relevant, real, and valued in the marketplace.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:45] At Tagoras, we partner with professional and trade associations, continuing education units, training firms, and other learning businesses to help them understand market realities and potential, to connect better with existing customers and find new ones, and to make smart investment decisions around product development and portfolio management. Drawing on our expertise in lifelong learning, market assessment, and strategy formulation, we can help you achieve greater reach, revenue, and impact. Learn more at tagoras.com/more.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:23] We want to raise some other data points. We cited some numbers around the size of the market, what’s being spent on all of this needed training and education that adults, workers, and learners need. But we also have some of our own data that we can share and that we’d like to draw on.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:41] We do. At the end of the past several years, we’ve conducted a survey to determine what learning businesses are already doing—what they’ve already been doing during the course of that year and up until then—and how they plan to focus their educational efforts and resources in the coming year.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:00] We asked about 14 different focus areas. And, again, like you were saying, Jeff, we ask, “Are you already doing something in these areas? Are you planning to start doing something in the coming year? Or do you not have plans to do anything with this in the year ahead?”

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:15] Again, we’ve asked about those 14 areas over a number of years now. We’ve been able to see how they evolve and what kind of picture they paint of what learning businesses are doing or plan to do. When we asked at the end of 2023, looking out toward 2024 and what we might expect to happen in 2024, three areas stood out for us as potentially related when it comes to how learning businesses can create significant impact in supporting not just the individual learner but also those employers and the broader profession or industry that the learning business serves.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:54] Here are those three areas. The first is aligning offerings with specific career or job paths relevant to learners. That could be through something like a competency model, a learning pathway, or targeted curricula. And of the respondents to our survey at the

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end of 2023, 83.5 percent reported already doing or planning to do something in that area around aligning offerings with career or job paths.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:23] In addition to that, we asked about pursuing new or alternative approaches to credentialing, which could include things like certificate programs, microcredentials, and digital badges. And 73.4 percent of respondents reported already doing or planning to pursue that as an area—newer, alternative approaches to credentialing.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:46] The third area we want to mention is integration of educational offerings into the learning and development programs of employers in a field or industry or into general workforce development needs. And 69.4 percent of respondents to our survey reported already doing or planning to do that in 2024.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:09] If you take those three together—so you've got the paths (career or job paths), alternative credentials, and then satisfying an employer need or general workforce development need—if you picture those as a Venn diagram with three intersecting circles (hopefully not too hard to do even if you're listening to an audio podcast), think of those three intersecting circles, and right there in the middle where those three circles overlap, you get what we think of as a bullseye.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:42] When learning businesses provide education and training offerings that align to a career path or a job path, they offer a credential around that path that is viewed as valid and is useful in the employment market, and, if they do all of this in a way that integrates into the programs and needs of the employers in the field or industry they serve, then tremendous value is created for all those stakeholders. That's the bullseye, as you just called it, Jeff, and that's what we think learning businesses can aim for.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:13] Why? Why do we think that this is a bullseye to aim for? Why does it matter so much?

Celisa Steele: [00:11:19] As many learning business leaders have already realized, learner expectations have risen significantly. They're really expecting a lot more from educational experiences that they invest in. A lot of expectations changed as a result of experiences during COVID, for example.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:40] Yes, people certainly came out of COVID with different viewpoints on online learning, and that influenced then how they think about face-to-face learning. We're

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seeing that both learners and their employers are seeking more value for their investment in both face-to-face and online education and that the traditional conference approaches and traditional online educational offerings are increasingly perceived as not necessarily providing that level of value that they're seeking.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:14] On top of all that, we have a world where competition for a learner's attention is really, really high. Just getting through to somebody, getting read in their inbox can be incredibly difficult. There's also competition for wallets. What will that learner choose to spend their limited dollars on? And then also there's competition for the employers' wallets as well. What are they willing to invest in on behalf of their employees? And so being able to hit this bullseye that we just described can really stand a learning business out as *the* education provider in whatever its specific field or industry is.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:57] Definitely much easier to get attention and to get a share of wallet if you can say that this is really providing that pathway for the learner—it's got some good credentials standing behind it; it's meeting a market need. People are much more likely to pay attention to that in the first place, as we're saying, and then be willing to spend money for it. We're talking about fairly sophisticated stuff here: learner pathways, alternative credentials, thinking about this whole world of workforce development. Hitting that sort of bullseye requires a level of strategic focus and potentially resources beyond what a learning business may currently have at its disposal or what it's been accustomed to doing.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:46] If that sounds like you, if you're listening to this and thinking, "Wow, this sounds like a lot to bite off," one place that we recommend you can start is by assessing your current situation, really understanding what the gaps are that are potentially preventing you from being able to execute on this kind of strategy. We do have a tool that we've talked about before that we think can be helpful in helping you understand your situation—that's the Learning Business Maturity Model.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:14] Yes, because this really is about how highly tuned are you as a learning business that has the capacity and the capabilities to deliver this kind of experience, to deliver this kind of value and impact that we're talking about here. The Learning Business Maturity Model and the accompanying assessment give you a way to get a view into that and to determine, "Are we the type of organization that can deliver this value that we're talking about, that can hit this kind of bullseye for our market? Or do we have areas that we need to do work in?" The model and the assessment are going to help you identify those areas like, "This is where we need to be able to improve if we are going to be the market-leading learning business

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that can provide this type of value, this type of experience for learners, their employers, and this field or industry that we serve.”

Celisa Steele: [00:15:04] Another thing we can say is, if you’re thinking, “Wow, this sounds like a lot to do to hit this bullseye,” this is a place where you can think about partnerships. We like to talk about partnerships a lot on the podcast, in part because we do believe that, when those players operating in that third sector can complement each other, there’s a lot of value to be delivered to the learner and the employer and the field, profession, and industry by partnering and collaborating when appropriate. So you, as the learning business, don’t necessarily have to “own” the digital credential or the certificate program that might be part of this bullseye, but, if you’re in partnership with someone who is owning that piece of it, and you’re tightly collaborating, you can still achieve those three pieces. It just may be that you’re bringing two, and someone else is bringing one piece of the puzzle.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:56] We mentioned earlier—you mentioned, Celisa—that employers themselves, at least the larger and more sophisticated ones who have a dedicated learning and development function, are starting to take this whole idea of professional development and continuing education much more seriously in how they’re thinking about things. There are most likely coalitions of employers within your field that you can be in partnership with. We mentioned in passing that academic institutions are getting much more interested in this, continuing education, professional development becoming much more of a focus. A lot of times they’ve got the content; they may have the connections in their particular region of the country or whatever the case might be, but fertile opportunities for partnering in a variety of different ways to meet what is going to be a very dynamic and evolving need. There really is no one organization that can address a need like this. Partnerships, I think, are just so key to doing this.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:55] And delivering the type of value, the kind of impact that’s at the center of this Venn diagram that we’re talking about, we’re getting to the point where that’s table stakes. That’s what people are going to expect. Again, they’re looking for that high return on investment. Being able to deliver that kind of impact, that kind of value isn’t going to be optional. Learners and employers have too many other options or too many competing demands to make the investment if they can’t be assured that there’s some big return and some real value and significant results in that investment.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:31] Our view is now is the time to pull back. Consider approaches like learning paths, career paths that we’ve talked about here. Consider alternative credentials, credentialing in general, how that fits into how you’re serving your market. Consider how you’re supporting

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the workforce in your particular field or industry. What support can your organization provide? Pull back, and consider those three things, those three overlapping circles in that Venn diagram—and then aim for that bullseye.

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:11] Providing learning paths, offering valued credentials, and aligning with employer needs—each of those three activities is powerful on its own. But the combination of the three is even more potent and a bullseye we believe it's worth learning businesses aiming for.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:27] At leadinglearning.com/episode430, you'll find show notes, a transcript, and options for subscribing to the podcast. If you haven't yet, please subscribe.

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:38] And we'd be grateful if you would take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you enjoy the show. Celisa and I personally appreciate reviews and ratings, and they help the podcast show up when others search for content on leading a learning business.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:53] And please spread the word about Leading Learning. You can do that in a one-on-one conversation or e-mail to a colleague, and you can do it through social media. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode430, follow the link to connect with us on LinkedIn.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:08] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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