

The eLearning Coach Podcast #1: Finding a Job in Instructional Design with Joe Fournier

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Connie

Malamed: Welcome to the eLearning Coach Podcast online at thelearningcoach.com. I'm Connie Malamed bringing you ideas and tips for success with creating online and mobile learning experiences.

This is episode one, 'Finding a Job in Instructional Design.' I wanted to begin with this topic because I get a lot of emails from people who want to break into an ID career or who are having trouble finding a job designing or developing eLearning. I thought some of you might appreciate hearing from a hiring manager. Today I'll be interviewing Joe Fournier, a director of instructional design and technology for a large organization.

Hi, Joe, and thanks for being on the podcast.

Joe

Fournier: Happy to be here, Connie. Thanks a lot for having me.

Connie: People have so many questions about these kinds of things. Can you just share a little bit about your current position and job responsibilities so we have some context?

Joe: Sure. As the Director of Instructional Design and Technology I manage a team of instructional designers. We basically create instruction that spans the gamut from instructor-lead, to eLearning, sometimes, simple job aids. It could be virtually anything, for any of the audiences across the company. We're a managed care organization that we go into States and basically manage publicly-funded healthcare for the States and do a great job at that. In an organization like this we have people who work as clinicians, we have people who work in technical roles, and a broad variety, call centers.

I manage a small team of instructional designers and contractors from time to time, and basically do soup to nuts.

Connie: In your whole career, about how many instructional designers do you think you've hired?

Joe: I was thinking about that earlier today. I would think between contractors and permanent employees somewhere near a dozen and twenty. It's kind of hard to keep track.

Connie: Sure.

Joe: Maybe around 15.

Connie: In general, what are the first things that come to mind when managers are looking for instructional designer? What are some of the top skills you're looking for?

Joe: I think in my mind, the number one thing is strong communication skills, obviously. It's kind of foundational. The ability to take ideas and communicate them to other people. When you get into an interview situation, that's sometimes indicative of someone's likely success as an instructional designer, the ability to get into that interview and communicate ideas.

Not necessarily be a great toastmaster-quality speaker, or anything like that. I think one of the most important things we do as instructional designers is we take complex ideas and we simplify them.

In my old life years and years ago at IBM, I was a technical writer. In that role we did everything with words and maybe a few pictures here and there. We do it as learning designers, almost as choreographers. We're taking a message and we're creating this cognitive, this mental dance, this experiential dance that people are going through in order to learn something. The communication skill is probably the number one thing.

Obviously we look for somebody who has a certain level of creativity. That's a whole other conversation around the nature of creativity to get into. We look for demonstrated creativity. I once talked to Thiagi, and he said that he had started looking for people with improv skills. I thought that was really interesting. I sometimes look for people who have experience around marketing, or other kinds of messaging besides instructional design. There's a lot of intersections.

Connie: There are so many intersections. I love that metaphor of being choreographers. When you talk about communication, are you thinking of verbal? Or, are you also looking at the written and the visual? Not that people have to be an artist, but that they can sketch out an idea that they can visually communicate. Also, written communication. Do you look at all aspects besides verbal?

Joe: Absolutely. As I mentioned earlier, in the organization I'm in now, and in other organizations I've been in over the years, the instructional designers do the job from the beginning to the end.

In some organizations you'll see very rigid segmentation. Somebody does analysis, somebody does a design plan, somebody else executes on the design. That's not been my experience. We look for people who have broad skill sets and competency.

In terms of the visual, in terms of being an artist, for example, that's not really necessary at all. Being able to leverage media assets, to be able to go and take an illustration, clip art, and put it together to create an illustration, to create an infographic, things like that are really important. What we really looking for, and I think I can say 'we' in the industry-wide sense, is, we're looking for people with those skills to conceptualize things.

Connie: Okay. To conceive and conceptualize, yes.

Joe: Absolutely.

Connie: I know this is hard to generalize, but do you see some character traits of successful instructional designers that you can pinpoint?

Joe: Yes, there's a couple things. One, I would say is a thirst for learning personally. I tend to see more successful instructional designers tend to be people who are maybe not insatiable learners, but certainly borderline. I used to joke and say that I was a learning junkie.

Connie: I hear you.

Joe: I see that as a characteristic. The ones who are really good are constantly out in front, learning more. The other thing I see is, I see a lot of people with musical talent. It's interesting to me. You very often don't realize that people have these side talents. Sometimes it's musical. I've also seen visual arts, where people were painters on the side. You just don't realize it, but you see those kinds of things manifest in hobbies. In the organization I'm in now, over half the people in the organization are musicians. That was not on purpose by any means.

Connie: That is really amazing. How much do you think a degree matters in terms of instructional designers getting hired? This is a very controversial topic. I know when I do a podcast with a professor; I know what that answer is going to be. I'd like to hear what your perspective is as an industry person.

Joe: There's a gate in a lot of organizations that you have to cross through. You have to have a degree for certain job roles. It's not necessarily because you have to have that in order to perform as an instructional designer, per se. For certain levels or positions, HR or recruiting organizations, I don't actually know who sets that determination, but they set that barrier and say 'You have to cross over this'. I've seen that in a number of companies. In that sense it's very important.

I don't know that a degree in instructional design is necessarily critical. I've seen a lot of good instructional designers who did not have a degree in instructional design. Rather, they might have a degree in English. I've seen a degree in Geography, and a variety of things. As a

matter of fact, one of the guys I'm working with now, who is one of the most amazing instructional designers I've worked with, has a degree in Fine Arts. He is incredibly creative and very talented, but does not have a degree in instructional design. You would have expected him to be a musician for sure.

Connie: For the people who don't have degrees, where do they get their sense of learning theory from? Are they just studying it on their own?

Joe: I think so. That's what I've seen. That comes out when you talk to people and when you see samples. That's something that I really can't emphasize too much is the need to have good samples. When I interview for a position, I have to look at 100 resumes personally. Recruiters are screening those as well. There's a lot of competition for the roles. Samples are essential because when you're looking at that many people, it's tough to look beyond the paper and see what someone's real competency is. I look for a portfolio of some kind pretty regularly.

Connie: Okay. That's really good information. I get that question a lot. Do people typically put their portfolios online for you? How do they usually present them to you?

Joe: It's best if they do. Usually what I get is people want to send me individual files, .zip files. A good part of the time people will tell me they just can't share samples because they're proprietary.

Connie: Right.

Joe: I understand. I don't want to see anything that's proprietary and I don't know anyone who does. I've been very uncomfortable in the past when someone came in and brought samples to me and I felt like they were proprietary even when I was being assured that they weren't. What's best, really, in the corporate environment, I think, is to put things online to be able to access an eLearning example. I want to be able to play it in context in that environment. If you send me a .zip file, depending on the organization, I may not be able to open it, or it may get stripped. It may not run properly because there's a lot of security inside organizations. Putting it online is probably the best thing to do.

The other thing, and I've recommended this to people who would have otherwise been good candidates is go out and get some experience with a non-profit. Do some work for a cause that you believe in and help them craft a message and get it out there.

The other thing, too, is not all samples have to be eLearning. I'm perfectly happy seeing things that are instructor lead. I've hired instructional designers who had literally no eLearning experience whatsoever, knowing that they were going to be doing eLearning. They were able to demonstrate the right level of competency that led me to have confidence that they would be able to master the tools that they needed to, more importantly, master those kinds of designs.

Interactive samples aren't really necessary all of the time. If you don't have them, it's probably not a wise use of your time to fake it and go out and try to get a trial version of a piece of software, just to create a quick interactive sample that's going to show that you're totally a novice.

You might actually, instead, design or develop a decent storyboard that would convey the idea. Which is something that we do in the instructional design process quite frequently as well. If you can convey the message through that storyboard, you may very well give yourself a leg up that even candidates that produce eLearning might not have. That ability to take a complex idea and message it in a way that promotes learning is what's really at the core of what hiring managers are looking for from instructional designers. The medium, I would say, is usually secondary.

I would want to know, in this day and age, I don't think in the past eight or ten years I've worked with a single instructional designer who did not at some point produce some kind of eLearning. It's just one of the media that we use. It's one of the ways that we transmit learning experiences, or foster learning experiences. You may not enter with high competency there. You may not enter the field like that. You may grow that as part of your career.

Really, the other piece that I think is important for people to realize is that a hiring manager is very often not looking for some boiler plate instructional designer. What we're looking for is someone who will fit with the team that we have, and close the gaps that we have to whatever degree, or augment the team that we have. Somebody who can grow on the team.

There are plenty of circumstances in which I've been looking to hire somebody where I wasn't looking to hire a superstar. I was looking to hire somebody into a growth position with the full expectation that we were going to work with that person for weeks and months to get them up to speed on our tools and our processes. If they're a good fit for the organization, if they have values that fit with the organization, if they have a collaborative mindset, and collaborative creativity, too.

I've seen circumstances where people interviewed very well because they came into the interview with a confident, open demeanor. When you ask them questions, they weren't necessarily jumping to, 'I am the purveyor of all great answers.' They were having a conversation with you. I've seen people actually do some analysis in an interview and that really shows well.

Connie: Yes, that's great. That's really very good information. A lot of good insights there.

How has the field changed in the last ten or so years? What kinds of things are different that you're looking for now than you used to look for?

Joe: I think ten years ago, it wasn't uncommon, or in some circles it wasn't frowned upon, to have a very linear piece of learning that was online. They called it a CBT, but truthfully it was just a point-and-click slideshow. It could be an hour or two hours long.

I think one of the big things that has changed is the expectation that learning experiences will be engaging. They actually foster some learning, rather than just convey some information. I think that's probably the biggest thing. Certainly the tools and technologies that we have at our disposal has changed quite a bit. At the core, learning is learning.

We have a better understanding of how people learn than we did ten years ago. I look for that in individuals who are trying to get into an organization that I'm in. I look for someone who has an understanding of how learning really happens.

The other thing, too, is a point of view on learning. Especially as you move to the higher positions in an organization, you're going to find yourself doing a lot of consulting. Even as a second or third year ID, you're going to be doing consulting. You're going to have people come to you and say, 'I need this. I need that.' You have to be able to shift their thinking when they're wrong.

You have to be able to collaborate with them to help them get closer to where you need them to be in order to craft the right experience. For me, one thing that's changed is I use the word 'experience' a lot when I'm talking about learning. I think ten years ago I was thinking about learning as something that you give to somebody.

Connie: Right. That you dump into their head.

Joe: Kind of, sadly. That was probably more the mindset back then.

Connie: Yes.

Joe: It's not anymore.

Connie: We know now that it has to be something fairly continuous. You have to constantly reinforce and provide people with all kinds of resources so they can just have information at their fingertips, all kinds of external performance support. That brings me to the next question which is, how can the instructional designers prepare themselves for the future? They're someone in school now, or they're someone who wants to make sure that they always have a good career in instructional design. Would you have any advice that you would give people for how they can prepare themselves for the future?

Joe: I think this really crosses over into other fields as well. I think one of the most important things to prepare yourself is to surround yourself with people who believe in quality. Get around other curious people. Get into small groups, if you can, or larger groups that are talking on the cutting edge, and questioning what we're doing now and trying to figure out what's better than what we're doing now. Some of the organizations that you and I get involved with, like the eLearning Guild or maybe ASTD, or ISPI is a good organization. There are a number of others as well.

Getting involved with those and paying attention to what top thinkers like yourself are talking about. What are the questions that are being asked? I think those are the kinds of things. Reading things that challenge you also helps you get prepared for the future.

I tend to really try to practice looking toward the future and questioning what it's going to be like and where appropriate, try to influence it. I think that's possible for anyone to do that. Think about what you want learning to look like for yourself and for others three years from now. Then, start pushing on that. It's a lot more fun like that.

Connie: It is a lot more fun. I think that's really good advice for people to continually question, 'How can this be better? What do people really need?' Maybe it's not even a learning intervention. Maybe it's something else. That's really good advice.

Finally, there was one other thing that I wanted to ask you about. I'm not sure if you can answer this question or not. Every year the eLearning Guild publishes a salary research report. It shows that there's an earning disparity between what male and female instructional designers earn. I wonder if you have any advice on how woman can break through this barrier.

Joe: I'm answering that from a disadvantage because I'm not a woman, so I don't experience the same things. But, I've seen that in some organizations. I won't mention any names. I've been in organizations where I saw that there was gender inequity. As a manager, you do what you can to adjust for that. Sometimes it's not due to a gender, that's not the cause of that disparity. I've seen it exist before. It's difficult to fix that even from a manager's perspective if the disparity is very far. It takes years to fix that.

I don't know anyone who deliberately creates this inequity based on gender or other factors like that. I don't work in an organization like that. I haven't really worked in an organization that I know of that ever did that kind of thing deliberately. I guess I would give the same advice as I would give to anyone. Put your best foot forward. Show your best work. Look for opportunities to excel in a way that's going to get noticed. I think that is something that matters as I look across organizations. The people who are best, who grow best in their careers are not always the ones that are doing the very best work. They are the ones that are doing good work that's getting noticed.

Connie: Interesting.

Joe: That, I think, is probably good advice for anyone, male or female. It's an interesting dilemma because I know it exists, but I can't pinpoint a cause. In the organizations that I've been in, even when it did exist, I couldn't see a deliberate purpose behind that or any deliberate cause.

Connie: The only other thing I can think of, and I love the idea of putting your best foot forward and making sure that your work is getting noticed, without being obnoxious about it. The only other thing I can imagine is possibly, and this is scary to give people advice like this, is to really negotiate. Come armed with information about what instructional designers are making in the region, or something like that. The reason it's scary to give that kind of advice is that you might miss out on a job.

Joe: What appears to be true to me is that the best negotiation happens when you're applying for a position. When you are at that point of being considered for a position, it's that point at which the other person really wants you. There's a tension, right? Once you're in an organization, I don't know how much latitude you have for negotiation at that point. I just really don't know.

Connie: I agree. I think it happens when you're getting hired. I guess the danger is that you might negotiate too hard.

Joe: I used to think like that. I think I'm changing my mind to believe that you're going to get the high sign. At some point the organization is going to say to you, 'You know, that's more than we're willing to pay.' They're going to be serious, and you're going to know it. That's at least Joe's thought process at this point in time.

It's not always about pay. More important than anything, really, when you're trying to land the perfect job, is do you have a passion? Do you have a passion for the mission of the organization? Do you have a passion for the work? Do you feel like you're going to be getting in with a team that, not only can you work with, but you can grow with. Can you do awesome things as a team? That's really, at the end of the day . . .

What we need is a certain level on Maslow's Hierarchy there. We need a certain level of compensation. Beyond that, higher compensation isn't going to give us real satisfaction. Working with a great team, where you're spending eight, ten hours a day with these people, sometimes more waking hours than you do with some of your family members, that's an even more important thing.

I think savvy hiring managers are also looking for that when you go and apply for a position. Are you a fit for the organization? You might be the best instructional designer on the face

of the Earth, but if you don't line up with the values of an organization, you wouldn't be happy there any more than they would be happy to have you.

Connie: Yes. So much hiring comes down almost chemistry, if you're a good fit. I agree with you that it may not be the most important thing, but I would love to see that disparity go away in one of these research reports some year.

Joe: I would too. Absolutely. I totally agree with you on that.

Connie: All right, Joe. Thank you so much for all of your insights. I am certain that many instructional designers, and people who want to enter the career, will be very happy with all the information that they've gotten here.

Joe: Thank you for the opportunity to chat with you. It's always a pleasure. I look forward to the next chance for us to have a conversation, whether it's recorded or not.

Connie: I was really impressed with some of Joe's insights. I hope you found it valuable.

Thanks for taking time out of your busy day. I hope to see you around the thelearningcoach.com. Stop by, leave a comment, or shoot me an email from the contact form. Take care.