Connie: Hello learning people, and welcome to episode seventy-one of The eLearning Coach Podcast.

I don't need to tell you that we're living in a time of exploding change and disruption, and I feel that there are some people in our field who are looking at all of this transformation and actually making sense of it. Brandon Carson is one of those people, and he captures it in his book, L&D's Playbook for the Digital Age. That's what we're going to be talking about in this episode.

Brandon is an accomplished talent development leader with extensive experience in creating global workforce development strategies, leading teams of all sizes, and implementing learning technology at scale. He's been a learning leader at well-known companies, including Home Depot and Delta Airlines, and is now Vice President of Learning and Leadership at Walmart. Brandon is also the founder of L&D Cares, dedicated to helping L and D professionals flourish and thrive.

You can find a transcript and the show notes with links to resources at theelearningcoach.com/podcasts/71. Here's our conversation.

Hi, Brandon. Welcome to the eLearning Coach Podcast.

Brandon: Hi Connie. Thanks for having me on. I'm really excited.

Connie: The reason I invited you is because I read the L&D's Playbook for the Digital Age, your latest book, and I loved it. I wanted to talk about it.

Brandon: Fantastic. Thank you.

Connie: The first thing I wanted to ask you is what was your goal when you were writing the book? It sounds like you had a concern. What was going on?

Brandon: Well, originally the goal was to spark a conversation about what I thought was a talent crisis that was impending at the time. It was primarily driven from just looking at the impact the digital age was having on business in general. I started the book before COVID hit though, and of course that changed a bit of the trajectory of the book, primarily because the pandemic, as we now know, exponentially accelerated digital transformation, but it also has fundamentally altered the conversation that employees and employers are having about the very meaning of work.

Obviously, I wasn't thinking about a pandemic about to unfold, but it was really just to spark a conversation about the impact that digital transformation was having in general, how it was changing work and how L and D too often is kind of behind the curve in that conversation. Even today, my biggest concern is how the digital acceleration is impacting the workforce in its ability to drive business value, and it's even now in a much more volatile and complex place because of the pandemic.

Connie: And the teams that help people up-skill and help people learn are just so important in that equation.

Brandon: Yeah. One thing I've been saying a lot, I actually say it in the book, that the one positive thing coming out of the pandemic, I mean, there may be a few, but one positive thing coming out of this is that the HR organization, the L and D function, definitely there's much more visibility to the importance of what HR and L and D does for the organization. We've had so much more conversations about wellbeing and employee mental health and how we need to provide more opportunities for even more people across the spectrum. So lots of great conversations have come. L and D and HR have been kind of in this heightened visibility mode since the pandemic.

There's been some good things, but it also has been quite controversial in some areas for L and D to step up to the plate and really start demonstrating where its value really lies. So that's a positive thing, but it's also been quite transformational for us.

Connie: I wonder if that's what you were talking about when you said that L and D is at a tipping point. Can you summarize the critical challenges that L and D has to prepare for?

Brandon: I really do think we are at that inflection point or that tipping point, like you said, in some respects. The pandemic we saw business leaders rely more and more on us talent professionals to help smooth the rapid transition to what we now sometimes refer to new ways of working. I can guarantee you there's no CEO in February of 2020 that thought in 30 days they would have a distributed workforce almost 100%. No CEO was thinking that. But guess what, it happened. Candidly business continuity became the number one driver, if you will, of everything, and L and D and HR being a key catalyst for that. So that new way of working, we were still defining that, but we had to pivot very quickly.

It's been a bumpy ride. The challenges have been significant. I mean, you look at everything from the basics of how to move to a distributed

workforce in just a matter of days and weeks instead of months and years. Honestly, I don't know that we would've ever been having some of the conversations we're having, had it not been for a global pandemic. But then how do you keep the workforce engaged and productive as we go through this crisis, and helping to, like I said, ensure the health and wellness of the workforce?

I was at an airline doing this, and that became the number one conversation is not only how do we keep our customers safe, but how do we keep our employees safe? We had a frontline audience, we were an essential service to the nation, so we had to continue functioning in a pandemic like this. Safety obviously is a key concern. And then as we've seen, there's been a lot of exposure to the vulnerabilities and a lot of our organizational design over the last couple years of this.

I think to me, as a primary driver for L and D today, one should be to quickly gain a strong perspective on how to address the crisis of confidence that business leaders are in when they're thinking about the capability of their workforce. The strategies are changing quicker, not just brought by the digital age, but brought by these new ways of working and new business models that are erupting and that are changing quickly. I can tell you, there's probably not one CEO today who's really confident that they've got the workforce with all the skills needed in this time, this day and age. We're constantly having conversations about what are these capabilities that we need for these new ways of working?

It's our time to shine, if you will, from an L and D perspective. And to be effective, we have to make the changes necessary in our practice to gain the right insight, the right perspective to lead the business for it. I think that's a key part that comes out in the book. I literally say at one point that learning is the business strategy now. We're receiving the business strategy and then creating our own strategy. No, the business needs us to really help drive the strategy because in business, as we know, and I know this is going to sound a little cliche, but the most critical asset is our people, and especially now, and we have to have the right talent at every level in the organization.

This right now, Connie, even before the pandemic, this is the largest scale job transformation in human history that we're under. That's what the digital age was bringing us. And then you add the paralysis of most L and D organizations that they're under because they're stuck in this cost center trap, they're usually siloed far away from where the work is happening and

they're waiting on the order from the business. And that's just an operating model that is not sustainable anymore.

Connie: How can they change from a cost center to a profit center? How can they be seen in that way?

Brandon: I talk at length a lot about how systemically the corporate learning function is compromised and it's compromised by design; where it's placed, how it's funded, and often who leads it. But to your question, in some respect, I think it needs to be reframed. It should be less about L and D making a case for change; more about a deeper and broader consensus among the company's leaders that there needs to be a wholesale rethinking of how they train and educate their workforce. The company's strategy should incorporate training, career mobility and growth, health and wellness, diversity, inclusion, belonging, and also focus more on redesigning the workplace environment to make it more conducive and motivating for workers to learn.

That last part I really want to stress a lot, that we in L and D should be thinking more and driving more conversation around the workplace environment itself, like the physical environment that workers are in. I know a lot of us are remote now, but guess what, a lot of us are not. A lot of us are frontline workers who are in these physical locations where the work occurs. We need to rapidly move away from what John Hagel refers to as the scalable efficiency model that's been constructed since manufacturing really went into mass production and they created what are called scalable efficiency work models. It's basically just about widgets and how are the most efficient ways to create the widgets. Let's design the work environment. It's kind of like back to that assembly line kind of model of thinking.

John Hagel talks about moving from that to a scalable learning model, which really takes that rigidity and authoritarianism out of the work operating model, if you will, and reconstruct the work environments to be more conducive for motivating employees to be able to learn more and to be able to learn more at work and in work. A lot of times we talk about embedding learning into work. This is not an overlay though. A lot of times, L and D gets stuck in that overlay model where, okay, the work environment is constructed and we have systems, and we have physical aspects to how the work gets done. Well, let's come in and accept the deficiencies that are already there and let's overlay performance support, or some model of providing access to information within that deficient work

environment. What I'm saying is no, we need to have conversations about reconstructing the work environment itself.

I know right now especially it's a conversation that's happening a little bit more often because of the pandemic. A lot of companies are rethinking return to office and the cubicle environment. They're looking at safety. Is this a once in a century pandemic, or is this a century of many pandemics? There's a lot of questions about that. I think L and D and HR could play a more pivotal role in that conversation if they can get that seat at the table.

Connie: Well, can you give me an example of what a reconstructed work environment could look like?

Brandon: One thing I go to, and in some respects, it's kind of an example, if you look at Apple Park and when Steve Jobs was designing the new Apple workplace that has gotten a lot of press about its futuristic looking design and its click wheel design, that was on the original iPod, but one of the things that was really important while he was designing this was to build into that environment the ability for workers from different functions to have serendipitous engagements with each other. Too often we construct our environments for work teams that are all focused on doing the same thing. So like, I'm on the design team; I'm with my fellow designers, or I'm an engineer; I'm with my fellow engineers. He constructed that, or at least was one of the tenants of the design, was to locate the bathrooms and locate at the food areas so that it would motivate people from different functions to come together.

An example is that; is to build the physical work environments to motivate people to learn from other areas of the business and to share and to collaborate. We're seeing a lot of that happening now as we're coming back to "offices" and we're looking at how do we need to reconstruct these physical places to maximize the benefit of when humans come and gather together again, versus all these Zoom meeting or virtual meetings that people are having and how do we construct those experiences to leverage the best of what's available in that modality. I think that's where we, and HR and L and D can really play an important role.

The mindsets have shifted a bit on this, and I think that's really good. Work conditions are obviously at the forefront. And for companies to remain competitive, we can see people are taking a more granular detailed look at what they want from work. So as we reform the work environments and systems, it's going to be more important for us to produce more worker-centric environments. And that's period. If you're not thinking that way,

then you're not going to be competitive enough in this type of ever-changing labor market.

I think this whole thing about profit center, cost center, it's less about L and D making its case; it's more about the CEO and senior leaders recognizing how critical it is to have a learning culture. And you don't create that overnight.

Connie: One thing it makes me think of is the design thinking model where you have to have people with different functions on your team. That's how it works. You get all those new perspectives.

Brandon: Exactly. I love the design thinking model. That's what I brought to the team at Home Depot when I was there. Quick story on that. Our remit was to create something that was new, that hadn't been done before there, and it was to rethink how we could bring more learning into the actual work environment. It became an overlay to the existing work environment. That's what has formulated my thinking about, we need to completely rethink the work environment.

But I came into the company, not from working in the stores. My team's a little different. A lot of them had worked in the stores, but I felt like it was really important for us to get out of the corporate office and get into the stores and do some of our work from the stores themselves so that we could see and experience ... this is called the ethnography part. I'm not a designing expert, but I think this goes to that; I wanted us to get into the environment so that we could understand it and experience it, and then think about the solution we were providing from problem statements that would arise from our deeper understanding of how the work gets done.

I think that's one of the critical aspects for L and D folks is if you don't deeply know how the work gets done, then there's no way you're going to be able to provide anything of value for those people that are doing the work. I'm saying how the work currently gets done, not how it should get done or not what the best practice is or the SOP; how does it really get done?

I interviewed John Hagel for my first book, and we were talking about that specific thing, that scalable efficiency to scalable learning model that he talks about. I encourage you all to Google it because he has a lot to say about that. He said, "I can guarantee you that probably the majority of what you provide the workforce in training has nothing to do with what they do in their job day-to-day, and you're having little to no impact on that." So until you get in there and know how the work actually gets done,

and you see what they're faced with," ... That's what we did at Home Depot; now we need to get in there.

Actually that brought a lot of modification to our original hypotheses that we had, and it brought a big modification to the design of our ultimate solution. That's why your design thinking approach to what we do I think is game changing.

Connie: Yeah. And all those audience research techniques that you get from user experience design, lots of good stuff there.

Brandon: Yes.

Connie: There are a lot of people listening who are not in a leadership position. What can they do to help become these kinds of change agents that L and D needs?

Brandon: That's a good question. Like I said earlier, especially now even more so than before, because I think all of us are in the thick of this talent situation right now, which it's really hard to find and attract really good talent into your organization, I don't like saying war on talent or war for talent, because I don't like bringing that war metaphor in, but it literally is quite a challenge right now. A lot of it's the market. A lot of it's the pandemic. We know that. But it's really critical to have the very best talent at every level in the organization. It's not just necessarily about high potentials or senior leaders; it's really at every level. Like I said, across L and D, it's necessary for us to know how the work gets done. Also, once we understand how the work really gets done and where the business is moving to, or needs to move to, then it's up to us to have that strong perspective on what needs are there from a performance perspective.

I don't talk a lot about business and L and D being aligned like so many others, because I think that's a bit of a cop out, frankly. I think what's more important is for L and D practitioners to bury themselves into the work like I said and understand the barriers. It's really important to understand the barriers that inhibits performance, what mechanisms are there that prevents access to learning. It may not be physical. It may be environmental. It may not be. It may be systems. It may be systemic. There could be a lot of reasons, but it's really our job to root out what those dynamics are and to identify unequal access to information and figure out what those dynamics are.

That's how you become valuable to the workforce and the business by being investigatory, having a strong perspective, identifying those barriers that prevent the optimal performance that you seek, realizing if they're

structural or systems-based, then you need the courage to bring that forward and argue for redesign of the environment or modifications of the systems. That's how we really prove our value. And for too long, we've looked at this as embedding learning into the flow of work as providing that overlay. I think we need to go beyond that and argue for a workplace that's conducive to the new ways of working that we're formulating. I know that this is more systemic, and I think that's where we need to not just nod our head and take the order from the business.

I'll just share a quick example. This was obviously pre-COVID. I was at Home Depot. I got a call from one of the merchandising leads who said, "We think we have a lot more to gain in sales, in our paint area. We need to do more training for more associates so that they can understand how to consult with our customers on choosing color." I'm like, "Okay, sure." That's sort of like an order up. I'm like, "Okay, but can we actually unlock this a little bit, and go a little bit deeper." I said, "Can we start with going into a few stores? Let's just observe the paint area. Let's do it together." "Oh, okay, sure." Of course I know what everyone's thinking; "Okay, I've got to schedule this."

We went into a couple of stores and just stood there and watched and observed the dynamic between customers and the associates and the environment and all of that. And then after a couple of visits, I just looked at him and said, "Training is not our problem here. The actual paint area is not designed, is not conducive for customers and associates to have the conversation that you are wanting them to have." So I said, "Why don't we just make some tweaks to the environment?" And he's like, "Well, we have 2000 stores, and that would be hundreds of millions or whatever, to think that way." And I'm like, "Okay, but how much will it cost to train associates in 2000 stores?"

It's a conversation that we need to recognize as L and D practitioners, when it's not going to have value what we're being asked do. I know that's an age-old question we always talk about, but that's why I said courage. We've got to have the courage to have those conversations with the business so at least there's understanding of like, "Look, this is not an intervention that you need from a training perspective; this is more of a design of the environment change you need." And then maybe have that conversation with those people.

That's an example of let's don't just align to the business and take the order and go, yeah, we'll do training and hope for the best. Let's don't bother with that because we are precious resources. We're finite. We don't

obviously get a lot of the same types of resources that other functions get sometimes. So it's really arguing for not aligning, but really helping to drive business value.

Connie: Nice. Well, you got me so curious, how did that end up? Did they get training, or did they change the environment?

Brandon: They got training. Sometimes we charge the hill and sometimes we have to choose whether we can charge the hill.

Connie: I know. Been there, done that. It's like moving a dinosaur. It's slow.

Brandon: Exactly. Those conversations are important though.

Connie: I agree.

Brandon: There wasn't pushback necessarily. There was an understanding that sure labor models, physical environments, it is systemic, and it is a big change, but at least having the courage to start the conversation, that is valuable. We're all going to make compromises, we're all going to try to do the best we can do in the day and move the needle a bit, and there's nothing wrong with that. I'm not here to judge anything. We all make these compromises, but at least having the conversation is valuable in that you never know what that's going to spur.

Connie: I completely agree with you. I've had the experience with clients where I recommend something, they don't listen. I recommend something a year later. And maybe two, three years later, they get it. I agree that you just have to start talking.

Brandon: Exactly.

Connie: I wanted to turn a little bit to technology now. You have a whole portion of your book where you're talking about how L and D people really need to understand and know about AI. I don't remember if blockchain was in the book, but I saw you posted about that recently. Tell me what you're thinking about the newer technologies.

Brandon: Well, that's really one of the three forces that I identify driving the digital age, what I call technology tsunami. People want to maybe call it different things, but the catalyst there is technology. It's really not possible for you to be in the learning function in a corporate situation and not have technology acumen. I say this in the book, every learning professional at every level needs to have a good understanding of technology and how it can be leveraged to advance whatever needs to be advanced in the practice, in what we do.

I'm not saying though, let me be real nuanced here, I'm not saying that technology for technology's sake. I always look at technology as a means to an end. And not only L and D having technology acumen, but it's definitely critical for us. Every businessperson obviously needs to have technology acumen nowadays. It doesn't mean we need to be deep subject matter experts in data analytics, for example, I mean, we're not all data scientists, but from now on every level of worker will be interacting with technology to get it done. So how can you defend anyone in our practice not being able to support the workforce from a technology perspective? And it's even more nuanced for us.

We probably have, and I've argued this in lots of forums, HR and L and D is probably the most complex function across the enterprise. We drive people capability. We drive the transfer of knowledge from one human to another, which I've always said is the most complex thing you could ever sign up to do. Our job as you know is fuzzy math; it's not black and white, but we need that digital acumen to be able to support the workforce.

As it comes to AI and technologies that are emerging, we know AI is a primary technology that business is investing in year-over-year. Your business, regardless of its size is involved somewhere in that space. So they're investing heavily in it. They're seeking maximum value from it. It is going to be a catalyst for personalization and adaptive products and services like you would not believe. I mean, we see that unfolding. So L and D and HR, we need to be fluent in understanding both the promise and the peril of this technology.

My boss says this at work, I love it. She says, "We need to be creating one-size-fits-one, not one-size-fits-all training." If you're still in that trap of doing this one-size-fits-all eLearning coursework curriculum that you're just going to fire hose out to the workforce, then you're not going to meet the needs of a large percentage of the population. So why aren't we able to leverage AI and other types of technology to build more assertively adaptive training for people? And why can't we adopt that technology that she says helps us get to one-size-fits-one?

The only way you can do that is to understand what technology can bring us and not rely on the IT group, which is overly constrained in resources, just like L and D. But if you're in IT today, your remit is quite significant and quite large. Especially for a lot of enterprise IT, they're so focused on the customer promise that the internal employee promise sometimes gets deprioritized or is lower on the priority. So we've got to understand the technology enough to be able to have those conversations with the people

that are going to put it together, or that are going to help make some of the decisions on how it's funded.

I think this is table stakes for L and D. If you're doing one-size-fits-all, you're spending too much money, you're wasting time and resources building training that probably won't have the impact you need. So you've really got to stop and think about what you're doing.

Connie: Where do you see blockchain fitting in?

Brandon: We've been investigating it a bit. Primarily when you look at what we're calling the talent profile, how are we as an organization able to have a heat map of our capability, if you will. How are we able to democratize the ability for the individual employee to be able to be exposed to opportunities to either elevate their career or look at broadening their scope of expertise, or doing new things that are interesting for them, how do we in a scaled manner build a system based on trust and accuracy that will allow that kind of marketplace of talent generate?

I think that we've got to start looking at some of these mechanisms to democratize that capability so that you can not only carry it with you, but you can understand that there's a model that is somewhat universal and consistent for you to be able to articulate what your skills are and what your capabilities are as it applies to opportunity for you.

I don't know yet. I think it's emerging for L and D, but there's some great thinkers out there. Trish Uhl is one of them, who I would highly recommend everyone Google or look up if you don't know her. She's a brilliant thinker when it comes to not only AI, but definitely blockchain and the future of capability from an HR perspective. Serena Gonsalves-Fersch is another person who's really thinking in this area.

I think we need in our practice to have this R&D component to figure out how do we determine what's too hyped right now? What's not hyped? What should we be looking at? What should we be focused on? How do we look three years out? How do we think about technology and more quickly move our practice forward and help our business and help our employees? I think these are all things that we can't just sit on the sidelines and wait for some vendor to come sell us the snake oil. It's like, no, we need to get into the trenches and figure out can this be leveraged? Does this make sense right now? Or does it not? And we need that capability on our teams.

Connie: So it sounds like blockchain might help with the accuracy, the trust factor, the taking skills with you elsewhere, and whether it's credentialed, or somehow have those skills be transportable?

Brandon: Yeah, exactly. Every company is having these conversations right now, especially in this age of the workforce challenges we're all having and trying to redefine our work and look at our operating model and our labor models and all these kinds of things. So everyone's really wanting to look at, do we have an inventory of capability? Do we know what we have? Do we know what we need? And then on the other side, on the employee side, we know we need more dynamic talent pools, we need to broaden opportunity, we need to move to more equitable opportunity, we need to look at underserved demographics and communities and people who have not had opportunity to move into certain roles. I think that a lot of these technology mechanisms will afford us the opportunity to look at that at scale and help broaden that opportunity for all a little bit more.

Connie: That's a wonderful use of new technologies.

            Brandon, you mentioned that you wrote your own playbook and that got me curious. I want to hear what your purpose was, what you included, briefly, and who did you share it with? What did you do with it?

Brandon: Yeah. When I was at one of the companies I worked at, the CEO had been talking, they had normally had these eight-year strategy sessions on what's the environment that we operate going to look like in eight years and let's start planning. Finally one day he's like, "Things move too fast. We can't think in eight years. Can we think in three years because things are moving so fast?" So I'm using playbook as metaphor for the learning strategy that you're going to need to be putting together because we really have to be flexible in today's world and more so than even before the pandemic. None of us, I think, had a playbook for a pandemic. Maybe the government might have had one that got buried or something.

            I was at an airline when the pandemic unfolded, and my budget was cut to zero in just a matter of days. Yet my remit didn't change because like I said, we were an essential service; we had to keep operating. So our focus areas changed in just a matter of days.

            The idea behind a playbook is to formulate your strategy and action plans in a manner that affords you flexibility to deal with the unknown, lots of the challenges that are going to be coming our way and issues that, a lot of times I'll talk about them using the term emerging needs, that you just can't plan for, unplanned activity. I think now we're all a bit more

understanding of the need to do scenario planning to come up with plans that what would you do in this situation.

I like to look at the L&D's Playbook as connected and obviously a key component of the business strategy. One thing I argue for is don't take your L&D Playbook and give it to the C-suite executives as a thing; figure out how to integrate it into the business strategy itself. It shouldn't be a separate artifact. Learning is now, like I said earlier, the business strategy. So don't let us use this playbook just to align, but let's be at the meetings when the decisions are being made.

In this playbook, it's really about building that more adaptable, flexible operating model. In the book I take you through those steps to do it. Everywhere I go now I create a playbook. This is kind of like if you think about the sports metaphor, this playbook is kind of the foundation, it's the glue, but there's also components here that may change on a dime. It just is what it is. And we've got to be able to have the planning and the affordance to be able to pivot really quickly.

Connie: That's excellent. Thank you for that.

Well, Brandon, thank you so much. This was really enlightening. I really enjoyed our conversation.

Brandon: It's been great.

Connie: I hope you enjoyed this conversation. I think we're in the middle of important work right now and it's just going to continue. Organizations will rely on us to help the workforce adjust to the digital transformation and to up-skill and re-skill people in order to provide more opportunities for all.

Again, you can find a transcript and the show notes with links to resources at theelearningcoach.com/podcasts/71. Take care, and I'll talk to you next time.