

The eLearning Coach Podcast

[ECL 075: Finding a Career Path in Instructional Design](#)

Hello learning people and welcome to episode 75 of The eLearning Coach Podcast. This episode is for all of the people who are trying to start a career in instructional design or who are new to the field. I want to talk about talent stacking and the many career paths you can take to get involved in creating learning experiences. You can find the show notes and a transcript at theelearningcoach.com/podcasts/75.

Talent Stacking

Let's start with talent stacking, which is a strategy for career enhancement.

Talent stacking refers to having a combination of complementary skills that work well together and make you stand out. You don't need expertise in all of these skills. If you have expertise in one area, you may only need competence in related skills. Then continue to practice and improve in those areas. Your talent stack should be a unique combination that gets you noticed.

Your talent stack will probably be different than the list of competencies you'll see for various roles in learning design.

Although talent stacking is not the right strategy for all careers, I think it's ideal for learning design, which has so many moving parts that no one person could fulfill all the roles it entails.

Here's an example of talent stacking. Let's say your talents are geared toward writing for an instructional design career. So, your expert writing skills include the ability to write clearly for varied styles and formats, including eLearning, video and scripts, manuals, microcopy and marketing copy. Another skill you might have is being quick and efficient at editing other people's work. In terms of instructional design knowledge, you have an understanding of how people learn and the best practices for improving performance. You know modern instructional design processes and can adapt them as needed. And perhaps your final skill would be in marketing. You know how to promote courses, engage audiences and motivate with words.

So that's an example of what a talent stack might be for a writing specialty within instructional design.

Now, let's move on to different career paths in instructional design. I work with a lot of people who want to break into the field and many people don't know that there are numerous instructional design career paths that you can follow.

Here are some ways that instructional design work can be sliced and diced. These are different ways to think about it and see where you can fit in.

Type of Organization

First, you can design learning experiences in all types of organizations ... corporate, nonprofit, academic or government.

An organization's mission and purpose can make a big difference in the type of work an instructional designer performs. For example, a corporate environment might be geared toward improving performance to increase profit or creating compliance training. On the other hand, designing in a higher education environment often involves training and working with faculty on their overall curriculum, classroom or distance learning courses.

Working in a school system may involve designing educational technology curriculums or focusing on curriculum design for varied subjects.

Government work might involve managing vendors who create courses or creating training for large government agencies. The military requires an abundance of training and many instructional designers work for different branches.

Then there's nonprofit work, such as that for an association or charity. That might involve designing and delivering training to association members or volunteers. You can see that an organization's mission is one of the keys to identifying the instructional design career path for you.

Type of Work

Another way to look at it is to think about whether you want to design for internal departments at a large organization, whether you would enjoy client-based work which is often very diverse or whether you're interested in developing commercial products—off-the shelf training or education courses that are for sale.

Many organizations hire instructional designers to create training for their own employees. This might include training required to meet regulations, to improve workplace performance and for professional development. Organizations also create custom learning experiences for external clients. Some develop education and training

products for the marketplace. The pressures, deadlines and focus of each of these approaches will affect the intensity of the workplace environment.

In my experience, client-based work can be really fun and diverse, but there might also be a lot of pressure due to deadlines.

Type of Audience

You can also design for specific audience types. You may be able to choose whether you want to design learning experiences for children, teens, higher education students or for adults. Because there are opportunities to design for all of these age groups.

Or you may want to design for people who speak another language or for those who have a disability or special needs, such as older adults. Unfortunately, not all age groups are equally funded, so it may be more difficult to find a job with one particular group.

Size of the Team

Another thing to take into consideration is whether you want to work alone, with a small team or a large team. The size of the group can greatly affect what you do every day as a learning experience designer.

On solo or small teams, designers are often responsible for the full range of tasks: analysis, design and production of learning experiences and materials. An increasing number of companies use very small teams.

On large teams, they may separate it so that instructional designers are often responsible for just the analysis, design and storyboarding, if eLearning is involved. Other team members take care of the multimedia elements and programming with an authoring tool.

Content Specialist or Subject Matter Expert

One thing that may appeal to you is becoming a content specialist or subject matter expert and you may already be one. See, instructional designers are typically content neutral, but some concentrate in one field. For example, if you're already a nurse and you want to get into instructional design, it might make sense to design and develop for medical audiences.

Another way this happens is you've been working as an instructional designer and you simply work in one content area for such a long time, that you develop into an expert.

So, if you have a special area of interest or knowledge, this career path might be good for you.

Types of Media

Another instructional design career path could be designing for different types of media experiences. Some instructional designers specialize in designing for one particular format, such as instructor-led training, eLearning, virtual reality, augmented reality, serious games and gamification, video and interactive video, websites and learning portals, job aids, podcasts. The list goes on and on. On the other hand, you may be comfortable designing for many types of media and environments.

Technical Specialist or Developer

Another path to consider is that of the technical specialist or developer. Quite a few instructional designers migrate partially or wholly into the technical development side. They just happen to enjoy this and this is a fairly common instructional design path. Becoming an authoring tool specialist may involve gaining competence in several authoring tools, like Articulate Storyline and Adobe Captivate or Lectora. It may also involve building learning portals (websites), creating mobile learning products and other technical tasks. On this path, you may not do any of the analysis, design and writing work.

In organizations with a one-person design team, the instructional designer may do both design and development or outsource just one part of a project.

Media Specialist for Learning Materials

You may also enjoy working as a media specialist for instructional design. In smaller organizations and academic centers, instructional designers wear many hats. These might include audio and video production and editing, as well as graphic production. Some come to the field with past experience in these areas or develop competencies on the job. By specializing in media, you can use your instructional design skills to ensure your media productions are instructionally sound.

Project Management

If you're very organized and you like to plan, you may be interested in becoming a project manager. All design and development projects require planning and management. Some instructional designers develop the skills to create and follow through on project plans. Those interested in this path should get supplemental training in project management and leadership. This role often requires exceptional people skills, business savvy, and knowledge of project management procedures and software, both traditional and agile.

Curriculum Design

Now back to that curriculum design path that I mentioned earlier. Through instructional design knowledge, you can help school systems, higher education, companies and non-profits develop curriculum for formal and informal learning. The curriculum designer analyzes the standards, goals and purpose of a curriculum and devises high-level learning strategies to meet these goals. Curriculum designers might also be involved in selecting textbooks, defining certification requirements and creating assessments.

Managing an LMS

Now, not everyone thinks of this next one as an instructional design role, but in my experience, I've seen quite a few people break into the field by managing a learning management system because large organizations and institutions require one or more full-time staff to manage their Learning Management System (LMS). Technically-minded people are capable of taking on this position. Large LMS applications can be complex and require special training from the vendor to make full use of the program's capabilities.

The LMS manager ensures the system is running smoothly, trains others in its use, creates standards for the many detailed issues that arise and troubleshoots technical problems. In some cases, you get to dip your toes into instructional design by seeing a lot of eLearning, perhaps fixing small problems in courses and when you train others in LMS usage. Sometimes people are very happy to stay in this role, and other times they use it as a way to break into instructional design because they get familiar with what a lot of eLearning courses and training programs look like. And they may design their own LMS-related training.

Community Manager

Now here's one you may not have thought of and that's working as a learning community manager. As the number of communities of practice grow within an organization, there will be a greater need for online community managers. These individuals will need to understand the benefits of learning through collaboration and discussion. The community manager builds an engaging online community through positive relationships, relevant discussions and tuning in to what the members need.

Content Curation

Content curation is a newer role for the instructional designer. It refers to the practice of gathering, analyzing, and annotating resources for a specific purpose. The resources would be put online using a curation app. I've met people who do this full-time. In a large organization, the content curator might find the latest research papers on a topic for scientists, to keep them up to date. Or perhaps the best articles and courses for the human resources staff to develop specific skills. In this role, the digital curator would need to have sufficient knowledge of the subject and a good understanding of what will be valuable to the target audience. This is a position you could see more of in the future.

Closing

Although this is not an exhaustive list, I hope that pointing out these different possible career paths helps you determine one that you would like to take for now. And I hope you have more direction for building your talent stack. You can find the show notes and a transcript at thelearningcoach.com/podcasts/75.

If you want to find out more about breaking into instructional design, I've got a free 12-lesson email course at breakingintoid.com and a learning community at masteringid.com. That's it for now. Stay safe and take care. I'll talk to you next time.