

The eLearning Coach Podcast Episode 86

[Educational Technology: Surprising Careers You Didn't Expect](#)

Connie: Hello, learning people, and welcome to episode 86 of the eLearning Coach podcast. Are you exploring new job opportunities or considering a career shift into instructional design? There's one path you might not have thought about yet, one of the many roles in the field of educational technology.

In this episode, I speak with Matt Campbell, an ed tech consultant about instructional design and other opportunities in ed tech, where the jobs are and how to stand out in that job market. Matt Campbell is an ed tech specialist who has spent most of the past 15 years in different leadership roles in education. After starting out as a high school teacher, he spent nine years as a leader at Pearson in the higher ed division, three years as chief product officer at the Hausman Institute, and he most recently was senior director of instructional design at McGraw Hill, where his team of over 100 was responsible for the digital development of all K 12 products.

Matt also runs EdTech Expertz, a consulting company that helps pre-K to 12 higher ed and learning and development companies successfully navigate EdTech markets. He provides product strategy, executes on digital course management and creation, and delivers training. You can find the show notes and links to the transcript and resources at the [eLearning coach.com/podcasts/ 86](http://eLearningcoach.com/podcasts/86). Now here's our conversation.

Hi Matt. Welcome to the eLearning Coach podcast.

Matt: Hey Connie, Thanks for having me on.

Connie: I think it's so interesting for us to speak about educational technology because instructional designers do work in that field and yet many people do not think of that as a career option. So that's what I'm hoping that we can explain to listeners today.

Matt: Sounds good.

Connie: So how do you define educational technology or ed tech?

Matt: Yeah, this is kind of a tough one. So, I primarily think of it as corporate entities that focus on education. However, I would consider an instructional designer who works at online schools, whether that's K 12 or higher ed, to still be part of the ed tech community. But for the most part, it's a company that is focused on the education sector. That's how I think of that.

Connie: That's a good definition. I know people wonder where do ed tech specialists work. So first of all, it's obvious in publishing. What are some other places?

Matt: So, I kind of break this down. I have my own little categories that I use, but I think that it makes sense. So, one, I think of the upskilling sector, and this is building short courses, micro-credentials bootcamps, professional learning, and this is when we're talking about companies like Coursera, Pluralsight, Udemy, Chegg, Bezos Academy, so companies that are focusing on helping you upskill. And then there's the publishers. There are the big K 12 publishers like McGraw Hill where I've been in the last two years, Cengage, Houghton Mifflin, Savvas. And then you've got the supplemental publishing industry, and again, you have Edmentum, the College Board, eDynamic Learning. And then there's virtual learning. You've got K 12 online high schools, so you've got companies like Stride or Elevate K12, or Connections Academy, which was bought by Pearson a few years ago. In K 12, there's a whole area of support like assessment companies and tutoring and LMSs.

Matt: You've got your Renaissance. The ACT itself is a company, Carnegie Learning, and Instructure, which is the company that owns Canvas. Then you have general ed tech companies that have OER Open Educational Resources. Digital resources, tools, companies like Kahoots or Khan Academy or Boclips. And then higher ed, there's the OPM industry companies like 2U, Rise Point, Key Path or higher ed, just kind of general for-profit or custom curriculum. You got your University of Phoenix, Southern New Hampshire University, Six Red Marbles, Cognitive Arts. That's kind of how I break things down. The upskilling, there's the K 12 different sectors and there's kind of like the higher ed sectors.

Connie: Can you define OPM for people?

Matt: OPM is online program management. So typically, that's the industry where a university might want to reach a larger audience, but they're not sure how. So, they make a partnership with a company. A lot of times they do a revenue share where they share profits. A company will help a group

to recruit new students to market and then build their online courses partnering with professors. That's the part of the job I did. And then it helps programs like universities branch out and have a big audience.

Connie: Well, that is a very wide variety of places where people who are interested in ed tech can work, but is there a role for instructional designers in those places? For example, let's take an LMS. Where would the instructional designer fit in there?

Matt: Well, it's interesting in different ways. Some LMS's, Blackboard, for instance, are actually getting into smaller industries like the OPM industry we were just talking about. Blackboard has a new division where they're partnering with universities to help them build content. So that be one specific example.

I think that also, it kind of depends when you think of a core LMS, most of the jobs are probably going to be software development, but it depends on the more satellite little industries that they have. Instructure is a company that owns Canvas, I think they have some of their own professional development courses that they build, so they need instructional designers that build the professional development courses themselves. So, there are ID jobs, but I would say too, just to clarify, Connie, while I am an instructional designer, I know a lot of people when they're thinking about moving into ed tech, it's more than that.

Matt: There's also just regular design, graphic design and product designers. There's a whole field of content creators, which is good for former teachers, curriculum specialists and content analysts and editors, trainers are a big thing, skills trainer and coaching. And then even some people can get into sales and support. There's this new role I've seeing in a lot of educational consultant, which is former teachers who just work for these companies and help make partnerships with local districts. So, the ed tech world, there's more opportunities for people to get into it than just instructional design, but that's my field. That's probably what I'm going to be talking about the most.

Connie: Yeah, and that's really good to keep in mind because this is a way to still have your foot in the world of education. So how do you become an ed tech consultant?

Matt: So, I'm going to kind of break this into two categories. I think most people are probably going to be an ed tech contractor, and then I consider myself a consultant. I'll talk about the difference really quick. So, let's just say

you're out there, you've got some instructional design skills, and you want to do some work, so you want to be a contractor. I do think there is an abundance of short-term work that's needed. There's so much out there, so if you want to do it, I always tell people, I think the best examples is there's websites out there that advertise for it. There are websites like Upwork and freelancer.com, you can find a lot on LinkedIn of just small little projects. You can get started with simple things of just like somebody who will say, I'll give you 50 bucks to build me a PowerPoint. And it's a good way just to kind of go out there and you're just being a little bit creative.

Matt: You could take on more and more advanced projects, make a little bit money while you're doing it, or you just work for companies like McGraw Hill or like I mentioned earlier, stride or Southern New Hampshire University. Big education companies like that are always looking for people to do short-term projects. And then there's plenty of agencies out there that'll help you connect you with different work opportunities. So, I would say just try to get out there and just try to use the skills that you have to do a little bit of work if you're going to be a contractor.

And I'll talk really quickly about myself. I consider myself a consultant. I run this company called EdTech Expertz. And so, I'd say a consultant is a different category because it's usually somebody who does have more experience out there in the industry. And so at least me personally in this company, we partner with some companies, a lot of companies that are trying to break into new fields and they're trying to understand what the EdTech landscape looks like. What are the themes, what are the skills that we need to have, what are the connections that are there? Or they need something built. Maybe they have an LMS with a lot of courses, but they're not entirely sure but how to structure them or how to use AI or how to make them even more innovative. And so, they might work with my company, help them work through that. So, I hope that helps a little bit.

Connie: Yeah, that does help. In particular, what's the difference between the roles in corporate for ed tech and in universities?

Matt: I spent nine years at Pearson working on the corporate side. We were working with universities, and so a lot of universities had their own in-house instructional design team I've worked closely with. So, what I would say is that it is pretty much the same with what the end goal is. However, if you're working at a university, it's typically a bit stricter. I think that they have a lot more clear expectations of what they need.

I find that a university instructional designer is asked to do a lot more. They're kind of asked to do pretty much anything that pops up that might be educational, whether it's instructional designer or not. And I do think that there's typically lower pay at a university, but again, I could be wrong. That could just be based on the experiences that I've seen. But that's kind of my big takeaways.

Connie: Even though universities do have lower pay, what I have heard is that the benefits are often better. There are more vacation days. Often college tuition for a child gets paid for fully or partially, and some people just find the academic environment more fulfilling in terms of a career move. Do you feel that the ed tech world is oversaturated with people?

Matt: I do. It's kind of sad, but I do. I think that while there are a lot of people, especially, there's a role called transitioning teachers. I think there's a lot of them, people who are kind of teaching right now and they want to do something different. I do think that there is this kind of belief that the grass is greener on the other side, and that's not always the case. But there are success stories, and I at least personally have a soft spot for those transitioning teachers out there because I was a high school teacher and I switched careers, and I kind of just got lucky. I got a real lucky break and ended up being able to make it work out. I do feel for those people out there, but I think it's a little oversaturated.

Connie: So, as we talk about the skills that someone might need to get into the field, can you also talk about what could make someone stand out?

Matt: Yeah, for sure. I'm going to take this question from a very specific approach because it really depends on what the job is that you're going for. And I'm going to stay in the lens where I was at where I mentioned McGraw Hill the last few years. We hired a lot of people, which is very, if I was at a smaller company, I was going to hire one person. It'd be a very different thing.

Matt: So, what I would say is the number one thing that I'm looking for is I'm looking for signs that you're hungry, signs that you're serious about it. You got a lot of people who we are hiring entry level positions, but what I'm trying to find is the person who they can go out there and be like, well, I've just been a teacher for a few years, but you know what? I went out, I got my articulate license for a month. I got my trial. I tried it out, I built these things out. I have a portfolio. I've taken these LinkedIn learning courses. I worked for two months as a free intern just to kind of get some work. I'm looking for proof that you have some skills and that you're taking things

very seriously and it's hard to take that and to demonstrate that, but that's usually what I'm looking for.

Connie: Okay. Are there specific skills that people need?

Matt: Oh yeah. And this has kind of changed, so I'm going to talk about at least where we're at right now. For me, I think some skills are storyboarding and prototyping I think is really big. And you got to use the tools like Lucidchart and Figma are big ones that I think you need to know. Another really big one is accessibility, whereas higher ed went through a process about 10 years ago where everything had to be made accessible. K 12 is just starting to go through it or they're in the thick of it right now. And just understanding accessibility.

I do think AI is something like you have to understand how to utilize ai, and that in itself I think is a skill and that's a way to separate yourself in a saturated market. You've got to find ways to separate yourself. But I also think LMS admin skills are important, and this doesn't mean just I was a teacher on an LMS, and I entered grades actually going in and being an admin using some of the tools, building activities and an online experience, little dash of HTML, some multimedia skills. Those are some of the skills that I think are most in demand right now based on the fields that I've been in the past few years.

Connie: Those are good suggestions. Isn't it hard to get LMS training because that's usually a proprietary software. How does one get LMS training?

Matt: Well, I mean this is one of the hardest questions there is how do you get skills for things that maybe you need to have special access to? I mean, for an admin, if I stick with the theme of a transitioning teacher, your school probably has a learning management system. So, what I would say is, again, for me, looking for signs of people who are hungry, people who are trying to differentiate themselves, go out and talk to your tech team and just say, Hey, can I help you with some things? We've got to set up some online experiences for some of my peers. Can I help build them, help? Can I help set some things up? And free help is something that's usually a pretty easy way to get experienced. So, I think that that's an example. Go out and build a fancy class website. Build a website for your class, use some digital tools and offer, do a training for your staff.

Matt: Be like, Hey, I learned some new tools. Can I train you on how to use some new tools that you can use in the class? Something I always talk to people about. I always make this joke that you have to be a skills

mercenary. You have to go out and you have to get as many skills as possible. Then you have to be able to articulate those skills to people who are looking for whether it's a full-time or a contract type work.

And so, something I always like to tell people is I talked earlier about, well, how do I get access to these LMSs? How do I get access to these skills? Well, something I like to tell people is don't sleep on your current jobs. But other than that, I mean if you're not working at a company that currently has it, it is a little bit tougher. I think. You can get free trials on things, but there's LMSs like Moodle, which is free and open source. You can go out there and Moodle right now and just open it up and build a course without paying a dollar.

Connie: Those are good. Speaking of skills, and maybe you kind of covered this, what trends are you seeing in educational technology these days? What are your quote predictions for the future?

Matt: I mean, I mentioned AI earlier. Let me just kind of talk for a second about how I see AI being used when I kind of talk about it. AI being needed in two categories. One is efficiency, and two is innovation. So, one is efficiency, right? For instance, there's things that AI is very good at writing quiz questions. I think the days of going out and writing first draft multiple choice questions need to be over. I think AI is pretty good at that, at least to generate that first draft for you to review things like if you have large quantities of data that you need to copy and paste from one system to another, there's AI tools out there that can do that instantly. That's using AI efficiently to get things done quicker. Heck, even if you're applying to jobs, use ai, use chat GPT to make a customized version of your cover letter in your resume.

Matt: But the other category is innovation, which is utilizing AI to build new tools. Like McGraw Hill just announced that they have a writing and a reading AI tools that they rolled out, which is basically an admission that AI is not going anywhere. It's going to be a part of education in the future. And so, try to find ways to utilize the technology to help students to grow and use it in a safe way as opposed to being scared of it or running away from it is the right step. So, AI is one. Another thing I would say is I mentioned the first category of EdTech world. I think the micro-credentials, what I call short courses industry, the upskilling industry. I think that's the biggest one that's booming. And I think this for a few reasons. One is that, again, I worked for a long time in higher ed, and I think there's just more of a focus on that.

Matt: You don't necessarily need to have a very costly, very expensive degree to move in a certain field. Look at Google and Microsoft having tech bootcamps that you can go through to get skills, and they'll hire you. So, I think that's big. But then I also think that there's a lot of retraining that has to happen, and a lot of companies are investing money and retraining their staff. So, I think that that's a trend that I see is that if you're looking at which eLearning sector industry is really booming right now, I think that that's probably it. So, I'll kind of leave it there. So, I think that a trend, definitely AI, everybody knows that, but that's kind of my take on it. And then I think the short course upskilling industry is the biggest thing that I think that's booming right now.

Connie: I think a lot of people will be happy to hear that because there are so many people who don't feel like going back to school and getting either a master's degree or their second master's degree, and it's just easier to go get professional certifications

Matt: For sure.

Connie: One fault I see, I have a big Facebook group for people who are interested in becoming instructional designers. People often default to learning the tools. And I always think that the first thing you should know is just how do people learn? Really focus on that cognitive or instructional science first. Understand that and also understand a process for developing content or creating learning experiences and then start looking at the tools.

Matt: I completely agree what you're talking about there, that's hard to express in a resume, but that's the type of thing where you need to be able to express it and actually have those skills when you're interviewing. And it's very important to me. I'll give you an example. So, I hired 62 people in the last year, which is crazy. Question I always ask is, if you're building an online course, where do you start? I'm going to give everyone a free tip. It's a trick. I want to know if you know about backwards learning. I want to know if you're thinking about starting with the end in mind, if you're understanding about understanding your standards and your objectives and going to work backwards. That's one of the things that I'm always looking for because I feel like, again, and I mentioned working at McGraw Hill, we're working in publishing K12 education.

Matt: I'm interviewing a lot of former teachers. That's why I'm talking about a lot. I've gotten to know that community pretty well. I want to see maybe you've used Articulate, and you've built something, but I want to know why something's built. When I came to McGraw Hill, a lot of the things they

wanted to do was to kind of change our digital experiences. And one of the things that my team, right off the bat, we built a lot of assessments and my team's job was they were given questions and answers, and they had to build it in the tools. And I want to start telling my team, why are we building these assessments? If we're going to build an assessment, what are they supposed to be learning going to have the students actually work through and understand these things before they get to that assessment? I could talk about this for hours, Connie. This could be another podcast. But the whole point is I totally agree. I think that understanding the science of learning, anybody who works for me knows that I make it mandatory training. You have to know about understanding by design, which gets in the backwards learning and Richard Myers, multimedia learning. Those are principles that I think are absolutely necessary.

Connie: Okay, those are good. And when people who are going to work in the corporate world and maybe other places, I always recommend Julie Dirksen's book, *Design For How People Learn*, which is a pleasant trip through cognitive psychology. It's easy to get through and it's fun.

One area of expertise or competence that we often don't talk about, but it's very important, especially if you're working for a publisher, it's understanding the business world because it's quite different when you get in. And I remember my shock when people said, oh, having to think about budgets, having to think about how many voiceover narrators are we going to hire? The best thing to do is to hire one who can do four voices because that's less expensive, those kinds of things.

So, one is being aware of the business world and how that works. And then the other is soft skills, just being able to work collaboratively and be resourceful and handle difficult people and work with clients. Those are all skills that you may not have had to encounter in a particular job, and you really do need them in the world of instructional design. And I believe in the world of EdTech.

Matt: That's absolutely true, and it's interesting that you bring that up because I think back to my first few years working in EdTech, and while I do believe that most people that work in EdTech are in that industry because they want to make a positive impact on education, but I just remember my first few years being kind of bothered because as a teacher, you spend every day, everybody you work with is just thinking about the students and everything is all about the students and trying to think about them. And then you get into the corporate space, you get into ed tech world, and

there's a lot of talk about profit and efficiency, and there's a lot of different corporate bureaucracy.

You need that navigator. It is a different world, and I think that there's a lot of skills and soft skills that you mentioned that translate really nice, but that is a little bit of a different thing that takes some time to kind of get used to and to navigate. I'm not saying that EdTech companies are all just money hungry and soulless, but that's how businesses work. Businesses are driven by making a profit and are driven by having their value proposition and have to be efficient. You have to be able to make money, and that's talked about a bunch. And so anyway, I agree that question kind of hits home because I remember feeling that difference my first few years and now it's kind of second nature.

Connie: Yeah, it shocked me too. And for people who don't really feel like being in that world, that's when you know that working in higher ed might be the place for you. I know they have budgets, but my experience is that they're not talking about it as much.

Matt: Oh, yeah. I completely agree with that.

Connie: The one thing I wanted to say in terms of things that are difficult to express in your resume, one way I think that people can demonstrate that is in their portfolio where they can actually make a problem-based portfolio where you speak about the problem that you solve and then show your solution, or you found out about the audience a set of interviews, and then you chose this approach. So, I do think that it would be difficult to explain in a letter or resume, but a portfolio is definitely the way to do it.

Matt: Yeah, I think a portfolio is table stakes in today's market. You have to have one. It's that extra level of being able to show what you can do as opposed to just kind of telling through words, especially in the field of instructional design or if you're in any sort of design.

Connie: Matt, thank you so much for all of this. I think it will be quite helpful for people who maybe are just not sure which path they want to take, but they know they want to do something a little bit different than what they're currently doing. So, thank you.

Matt: Well, thank you so much for having me on.

Connie: I hope you found this episode valuable. I think following an Ed Tech career path could be a good way to break into instructional design or a fulfilling

career on its own. You might also be interested in episode 62 of this podcast, which is about an instructional design career in higher education. Again, you can find the show notes, links to resources, and the transcript at thelearningcoach.com/podcasts/86. Take care, and I'll talk to you next time.

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