Celisa Steele: [00:00:02] If you want to grow the reach, revenue, and impact of your learning business, you're in the right place.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:08] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:09] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:17] The year is still new, and so, in this episode, number 444, we want to offer some ideas we believe will shape learning businesses in 2025 and beyond.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:28] In our last episode, we covered key data points from our most recent annual survey of learning businesses, including survey respondents' top strategic goals for 2025, the top drivers for those strategic goals, trends and issues impacting their strategy, challenges with enrollments and/or registrations, barriers to innovation in education offerings, and top areas of investment for the year ahead.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:55] We have four main ideas to share in this episode, and each is grounded in the data from our annual survey as well as our experience with and observation of learning businesses and the global market for continuing education, professional development, and other lifelong learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:12] So let's dive in. As you said, Jeff, we have four ideas or takeaways to share. But they all are united by a single theme.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:22] That's right. That overarching theme that we're seeing is resourcefulness. We heard a lot in the survey about the need for resources, resources being a challenge. And we feel that there are ways that organizations could better leverage their limited resources. We feel there are some real opportunities to do that.

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Celisa Steele: [00:01:43] We'll get into some of those opportunities as part of sharing these ideas, these takeaways. The first one that we have to share is AIding strategy. We're oh so cleverly capitalizing the AI in AIding. I know you don't have that visual since this is an audio-only podcast, but just picture it: capital A, capital I, AIding strategy. Because, for us, this is about the greater role that AI could, and we believe should, be playing in learning businesses. Based on the survey data that we collected, AI doesn't seem to be as far along as it should be. We asked in the survey, "Where are you in implementing artificial intelligence in your education offerings?"

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:27] Organizations were not quite as far along as we would have liked for them to be—34.5 percent said they are just discussing AI internally and have no clear implementation plan.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:41] And then another 21.6 percent aren't even having the discussions about AI yet. That adds up to a little bit over a majority of folks who either aren't having discussions or are having discussions but haven't begun to do anything, which seems to indicate there's a lot of room for opportunity here.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:00] This is the time to be experimenting in a variety of ways around AI, seeing what you can do with that. Whether that's helping you with planning, whether it's helping you with creating, whether it's helping you with your data analysis—there are a lot of things that AI can be doing. We're trying our best to start putting AI to use in what we're doing at Tagoras and at Leading Learning. I will say we came up with AIding strategy without AI's help. We came up with that on our own.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:28] That's impressive. We want to make sure that folks know that we get full credit for that. Interestingly, we re-aired a conversation with Mary Byers a little bit ago, but one of the things she talks about in that conversation that I got to have with her is around doing pilots. I think that, where we are with AI, this is a time ripe for pilots. If you aren't doing anything yet, be thinking about what could you be testing out and trying and planning. And, if you are doing pilots, great. Make sure that you're giving it the attention you need, that you're looking at what the results are of those pilots, and then figuring out what that means for, perhaps, broader implementation of the pilots or other pilots to refine the idea. But the idea is start doing some things with AI.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:15] Whenever you're doing those pilots, or you're doing the minimum viable products, or whatever the case might be, make sure that you do have accountability assigned to that, that there are folks in your organization who are actually charged with we're going to run

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this experiment that involves AI and that whoever is named to lead that experiment is accountable for following through on that experiment and reporting on the results and leading the way in whatever the follow-up plans are going to be from whatever you find out from the experiment.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:45] Jeff, as you hinted, when we said that all of our takeaways, all of the four ideas we're going to offer, tied to this theme of resourcefulness, we saw in the survey that a lot of learning businesses feel like they don't have adequate resources to do what they need to do, and AI certainly represents a potential for helping to fill some of that need for additional resources. Maybe there is work that current staff are doing that AI could reduce the time and the effort that they need to spend on that or ways to fill in some of what might be perceived now as a human resource lack.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:19] Yes, we glossed over them as we were heading into talking about AI, about the different areas where it can help you. AI can be very powerful in analyzing and leveraging data. We know from past surveys that, as organizations are more and more focused on the data that they're getting from their learners and also the data that they're getting from their markets to be able to make product decisions, AI can really, really help you take a closer look at your data and make decisions from it. Of course, you have to back up from there and say, "Do we have good approaches to getting data in the first place? Do we have the policies around data that we need?" It may require some foundational work, but AI can certainly help with data.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:58] We very often hear from learning businesses that learner engagement is a big issue for them, and AI certainly holds promise there as well. That can tie to using data, as you were just talking about, Jeff, so that we can then better understand and better serve learner needs. It could also mean leveraging AI to help with personalizing the learning experience— that holy grail of personalization that we've been talking about for at least a decade at this point. But AI begins to hopefully make that much more feasible because it does require fewer human resources to make it happen.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:33] Yes, and those are two of the top two issues that we heard from respondents who were using or planning to use AI. They're going to use it for personalization, for better engagement, potentially, or they are going to use it around data. Another one of those is around creation. They're planning to use AI to help them create—and we would extend that into helping to curate—the right offerings, the right products to meet learner needs, which again goes back to that idea of engagement. If you're creating the right products and you've got

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a way to get the products out the door, you're curating your products in the most appropriate way for your learners. You're bound to be helping to bolster engagement.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:11] We've talked about our first takeaway AIding strategy. Our second takeaway that we have to offer is what we're characterizing as revamping revenue, and more specifically the need to revamp revenue.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:26] That came through loud and clear as a big concern for participants in the survey. They were concerned either directly about revenue or about increasing registrations and enrollment, which, of course, has that attachment to revenue that was also a big priority. They're also concerned about marketing, investing more in marketing, having more resources for marketing. To go back to our whole resourcefulness theme here, there's the need to have the resources necessary for increasing revenue. But one of the things we like to focus on is finding more ways to get revenue from what you've already got.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:09] We have some different ways that we've seen learning businesses use, ways that learning businesses can adopt and try out. One is simply by raising prices.

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:20] I feel like that's the third rail of learning businesses, of most businesses. People are always very reluctant to raise prices. With a lot of the world that we deal with—I hear this a lot in the trade and professional association world, for example—raising those member dues or raising prices of any kind is anathema. You feel like you're going to lose a lot of people. But, in our experience, price elasticity for education is often much, much lower than organizations think, and that means that raising prices doesn't decrease enrollments to any significant degree. There's a limit to that. You can raise them so much that it *will* impact it, but there's usually a margin there of 10, 20, even 30 percent that you can raise prices, and it's not going to significantly impact your volume, but of course it's going to immediately go to your top line.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:14] You can simply raise prices, or you can look to add some value to hopefully make that increase in price a little bit more palatable. You're going to give the learner a little bit more value to go along with that higher price tag. And we have a tool called the Value Ramp that we've talked about before on the podcast. We've used it with organizations. It's a very simple tool, but it helps you see how value and price relate. In our mind, usually that means that the higher the value, the higher the price. If you think that your audience might be averse to an outright price increase, then think about what value can you add? And value doesn't necessarily have to come with a lot of effort or a lot of cost internally.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:10:01] That's right. The idea there is, if you're adding value, you're moving a product up the value ramp, so you're able to increase its price because the perceived value is higher. So the price can be higher. And then we also have tools like the Product Value Profile, which gives you a way to look at a product to figure out what are the levers you pull to actually increase that value and move it up the Value Ramp.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:19] Simply raising prices is one way to help you revamp your revenue. Another way to revamp revenue and get more out of what you already have is by leveraging different product and pricing configurations.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:32] A survey question that we asked and didn't say a whole lot about when we presented the results on this—those who participated got these results—we asked about a range of product and pricing models, and this included things from bundling to subscriptions to buy-one-get-one offers. We had a number of things that we listed, and we found that most respondents weren't doing these things, and a low percentage plan to, so they weren't experimenting with their product and their pricing models. This is another area, like AI, where there could be some significantly higher levels of experimentation because, if you do those sorts of things—the subscriptions, the bundling, the buy-one-get-one—you're going to get more purchases from your current customers, and you're also, in the process, going to attract new customers who like these new models that you're trying out. But, again, most of the respondents indicated they're not doing this or don't plan to do this. We also didn't see a lot of evidence that organizations are engaged in doing business-to-business selling—selling to institutions, corporations, government agencies, whatever the right target is in your particular market. There's still not enough of that going on, and that's another clear area for revenue growth that's sitting right in front of most learning businesses.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:43] Another way to help you revamp your revenue could be by focusing on retention, and retention, in our mind, goes hand in hand with engagement. We've already touched on the fact that learner engagement is often a concern and a goal of learning businesses. We know that it is easier to sell to a current customer than to go out and have to acquire a new customer, and so, if you can keep that current customer, if that current customer is satisfied, then focusing in on that, focusing in on the retention, focusing in on what is going to keep that customer happy, that's a very good place to spend some mental energy and perhaps some dollars.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:12:23] Yes, and this is another one of those perfect areas where learning and business intersect. You want engagement, of course, because that's going to support learning. But engagement provides a great customer experience in the world of learning, and that keeps people coming back. So that's three: raising prices, leveraging different product and pricing configurations, and then getting serious about retention.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:42] We do have a learner engagement resource that we'll be sure to link to in the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode444.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:51] Yet another free resource. We already mentioned the Value Ramp. We already mentioned the Product Value Profile. And then we've got this engagement tool. Listeners know we've got tons of free tools here at Leading Learning that are there for you to put to use on your own or with your team. So come and get those.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:07] The fourth area we'll mention around revenue—in terms of leveraging what you probably already have or could get to pretty easily—is leveraging "other people's networks," which is a term we take from our colleague Tom Poland, who's a real expert at doing this. You can think of other people's networks, or you might think of other organizations' networks. These could be the partnerships that you can form. If you're an association, it might be with an academic institution or even with one of your subject matter experts. If you're an academic institution, it might be with an association. But this is something that's going to give you access to a whole network of people you may not otherwise have access to, which, of course, are your prospective customers at that point.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:51] These four ideas that we just gave you around revamping revenue, the good news is that most of these don't require major resources. This is working with what you already have in terms of products available. But these are different ways of working with what you already have, and that's how it ties, in our mind, to this resourcefulness theme that we set out at the beginning because we understand that so many organizations are feeling resource-strapped. It's about how can you make sure that you're getting every ounce of revenue, impact, and reach out of what you already have in your portfolio?

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:28] So far, we've got AI, which can help you make the most of your current resources, can really give you some leverage. And then we've got these revenue ideas where you can look at what you already have and say, "Where do we raise prices? Where do we reconfigure? How can we better retain? What are the partnerships that we can use to reach new customers?" Like you said, Celisa, that's all sitting there to take advantage of right now.

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Celisa Steele: [00:14:58] That brings us to our third takeaway, our third idea for you to consider, and we're characterizing this one as employing alignment. We've been talking about, in this episode and in the previous episode, these big strategic goals of revenue and growing enrollments or registrations. The third top strategic goal that we saw was around strengthening alignment with workforce needs. Again, we touched on this in the last episode. And then also one of the trends or issues that respondents found most important for 2025—in fact, the top one—was workforce and employer needs (job readiness, upskilling, and reskilling). We're taking those two data points from the survey and combining these because we believe that truly fulfilling workforce needs is going to require your learning business to align with employers.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:52] Yes, definitely. This is another area where taking a little time to look at what you're doing right now and figuring out where you can invest a little bit and make some adjustments could have some big payoffs. We've said for years, for example, that demand for educational offerings—and we include courses, credentials, other types of offerings in that—that's going to be heavily influenced by their perceived value in the employer market. That's whether learners perceive them as valuable, which is going to be influenced, to a large extent, by whether employers see them as valuable. Are they actually helpful in getting and keeping a job or in their career advancement? If you don't have a solid understanding at this point—and by that, we mean not just an opinion but actual data—of employer wants and needs in your market, you need to make it a top priority to do that assessment in early 2025 because that can drive what you're then able to capitalize on in the rest of the year.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:53] This ties to market research. That's a type of market research. And that is a big part of marketing, when you don't just think about promotion, but you think about understanding the needs of the market that you're serving. We know, as we've shared in the last episode, that many survey respondents are planning to invest in marketing in 2025. If you're one of those, this is a place to spend some of those dollars, on that market research piece.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:19] We've said before our fear is that, when people say they want to invest in marketing, that means they're going to invest in promotion—send more e-mails, run more ads, do all that sort of stuff. You may need to do that, but you also have to think about these other aspects of what makes up marketing, and that research into your market and into those needs is going to inform your product, your positioning, how you distribute it, how you price it—all those other Ps that are important in marketing.

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Celisa Steele: [00:17:44] And this is a place—and you already began to talk about it, Jeff—where partnerships can come into play. If you're an association, you might be working with a college or university to create a learning path for the profession and then embed that credential in either a degree or even a non-degree program. Be thinking about those possibilities. As part of that, get clear on is there someone in your learning business with responsibility and accountability for this kind of thinking, this kind of business development? Jeff, you were talking earlier about who's in charge of some of those pilots for AI. Similarly here, who's in charge of thinking through what it means to align with employer needs?

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:29] Because this does go beyond what typically gets categorized as selling, which is convincing somebody to give you the dollars. You've got to build the relationships. You've got to build the relationship with the partners—if you're an association with an academic institution or vice versa—to have the market presence, to have what you need in terms of an offering that's attractive in the marketplace. And then you're going to have to build relationships with the employers in your marketplace. Even if you already know them—hopefully you do—you're not going to be able to just bang on the door and say, "Hey, give me whatever for these courses." You're going to have to build the case with them. You're going to have to build the relationship. And, like you said, Celisa, somebody has to be in charge of doing that.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:05] To tie this back to the overarching theme of resourcefulness, for us, hopefully you know who those entities are that you need to be in contact with if you haven't already formed those relationships. And maybe you do already have those relationships to then build on. But, if you don't, odds are you know who you should be talking to in your market to better understand employer needs and wants. Hopefully this isn't about a huge, huge undertaking to understand employer needs. It's much more about going to the points and the references, people that you already know, and being much more methodical and consistent and deliberate about what you're asking them and how you're asking it.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:44] And to tie this back again to the revenue discussion, aligning with workforce needs is going to be both short-term and long-term valuable with revenue. Partnering with other organizations, extending your network to be able to reach the workforce with the right products, and getting to the people is going to be valuable. And then also, to the extent that you need to develop new products or modify your products to be able to serve employers well, those employers themselves are often the surest place to look for pre-selling or underwriting of what they need because, if it's not something that they want to build themselves, but they see the value, and it's very likely they'll be able and willing to underwrite

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whatever you're developing. You'll have a built-in market for the offering with that particular employer, and you're likely also going to be able to take it out to the broader market and meet other employer needs.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:37] That brings us to our fourth and final takeaway. In our experience, learning businesses are often seen as, or certainly often see themselves as, trusted and impartial providers, and they really pride themselves on that. This is very common in the association world. And so our fourth and final takeaway we're calling trusting speed because the way that some learning businesses have built that trust is by vetting content, by involving multiple subject matter experts, by establishing a body of knowledge. Those things can take time. This is around thinking about how can a learning business act nimbly and with speed and keep up with evolving learner expectations and the reality that learners are increasingly turning to Google and YouTube and now ChatGPT and other forms of AI for quick, targeted answers? Because of that slow way that learning businesses have, in the past, tended to build their reputation as being that trusted source, now we know that there's this need for speed.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:48] Speed is tied to trust at this point because, if you're not able to be there quickly with what that learner needs to meet his or her needs or their organization's needs, that trust is going to start eroding. Even if you do have the history and all of the weight behind you, if a subject matter expert who's got an entrepreneurial…or the regional university, if you're in the association market, or the association, if you're in the academic market, is being more rapid than you are in figuring out what's emerging and what the learners need. And maybe they're leveraging AI, as we talked earlier, to help them figure out the products and create the products and get them out into the marketplace. To the extent that that's happening, they become the new trusted source. Organizations have to dig in and think about where can we move more rapidly, and how can we move more rapidly to meet our learner needs?

Celisa Steele: [00:22:44] This is the Leading Learning Podcast. For us, leading learning is often about trying to be the pacesetter in the field or industry that you serve. And so, if you are not the first to market, if you're not speedy, then can you be seen as the leader? It's an interesting question, a little bit of an existential question, perhaps, for learning businesses to consider. Much of what we've touched on in this episode and in the past episode ties back to our Learning Business Maturity Model.

Jeff Cobb: [00:23:19] It does. And, quick reminder to folks, that model has five domains in it: strategy, leadership, marketing, portfolio (your learning products, your learning experiences), and capacity. All of those have come up in one way or another here.

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Celisa Steele: [00:23:37] They definitely have. Capacity, that you mentioned last, very clearly ties to this theme of resourcefulness that we said all of our takeaways tie to. We've been talking about revamping revenue, which definitely gets at the portfolio. We've been talking about market research and the need for that. And so much of what we've talked about has been around strategy and what is it that you're focused on in 2025? And then to execute on strategy, you have to have leadership. We just wanted to re-mention the Learning Business Maturity Model because that's another resource. We'll make sure to link to that in the show notes as well.

Celisa Steele: [00:24:18] We're not done yet—keep listening because we're going to recap what we've talked about, and we're going to offer some reflection questions because you and we both know that spaced repetition and reflection are important tools for learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:24:32] At leadinglearning.com/episode444, you'll find show notes for this episode, a transcript, and options for subscribing to the podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:24:41] If you enjoy the Leading Learning Podcast, please do us and a colleague the favor of sharing this show with one other person who you feel would appreciate and get value from it.

Jeff Cobb: [00:24:52] Walk right up to them and say, "You need to listen to the Leading Learning Podcast." Or pick up the phone and call them. Text them if you have to. But find that one person who's going to value the podcast, and make sure they know about it. Now, to recap this episode, we offered four ideas, all tied to the theme of resourcefulness. We described these as AIding strategy, revamping revenue, employing alignment, and trusting speed.

Celisa Steele: [00:25:25] To help you understand how these ideas might play out in your learning business, we want to offer some reflection questions for you to consider on your own and then, if you have one, with your team.

Jeff Cobb: [00:25:38] Based on that first takeaway, ask yourself, where is your learning business with AI? If there are no pilots or tests going underway yet, what can you do in the coming year? If you do have pilots or tests going, what can you do to continue those or to run new ones?

Celisa Steele: [00:25:59] Related to that second takeaway, revamping revenue, what might you do to diversify or increase revenue? Think through, out of what you already have in your portfolio, what might you do to get more dollars coming in from those same products or

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potentially to diversify so that you're less dependent? That could be less dependent on a business model, not necessarily on specific products. It could be, if you're only doing direct-to-consumer selling at this point, looking at business-to-business, for example.

Jeff Cobb: [00:26:30] On that third idea, employing alignment, how clear are you on the needs of employers in the market you serve? Is it time to collect some data? That could be through an online survey or perhaps better yet some one-on-one in-person or online discussions with key employers.

Celisa Steele: [00:26:52] Related to the fourth takeaway that we characterized as trusting speed, what else might you try? Where might you make some fast progress to test an idea or concept?

Jeff Cobb: [00:27:07] Those are our takeaways and reflection questions. Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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