



Leading Learning Podcast Episode 259

Michelle Weise (00:00):

There are all these different kinds of skills that we have, but we haven't learned how to surface them and articulate them. And that translation process is something really this third sector, I think, has an opportunity to facilitate and help learners and workers translate their skills into the language of the marketplace.

Jeff Cobb (00:22):

I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:23):

I'm Celisa Steele, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb (00:31):

Welcome to episode 259 of the Leading Learning Podcast, which features a conversation with Michelle Weise. This is the second episode in our seven-episode series on the surge of the third sector of education. Michelle Weise is an author, most recently of *Long Life Learning: Preparing for Jobs That Don't Even Exist Yet*. She's also an entrepreneur in residence and a senior advisor at Imaginable Futures, a global education initiative exploring how to solve for intergenerational mobility through a two-generation approach that involves early childhood interventions as well as facilitating more pathways for student parents. In short, Michelle spends her day thinking about how to better prepare working-age adults for the jobs of today and tomorrow. Celisa spoke with Michelle in December 2020.

Celisa Steele (01:27):

You and I are talking as part of a podcast series that we're doing on the third sector of education, the sector that's made up of providers that serve adult lifelong learners after they've finished their formal, degree-granting education. So maybe just talk a little bit about where you interact or have interacted with that third sector of education professionally, and personally if you'd like.

Michelle Weise (01:53):

Yeah, I've had a really interesting career where I've gotten to really engage with what you call the third sector from a multitude of stakeholder viewpoints. So I used to actually be a college professor. I worked for an ed tech startup that was helping service members transition out of the military into civilian careers. I worked in a think tank that was devoted to disruptive innovation, Clayton Christensen's theories, and thinking about people whose alternative to higher education was really nothing at all. Then put those theories into practice by building an innovation lab for Southern New Hampshire University, which is a huge online open access institution, and then went on to work for a funder called Strada Education Network and built

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their Institute for the Future of Work, which was trying to think about our most vulnerable populations and how we ensure that we don't leave behind a huge swath of working-class Americans as we build toward the future.

Michelle Weise (03:01):

So it's been this really interesting space in which I've been able to really work with all of the different kinds of stakeholder groups that are really trying to enable more and different kinds of pathways for a very different kind of learners than maybe we were expecting to work with. I think we tend to think of those traditional 18- to 24-year-olds, but a lot of my career has really been spent thinking about everyone outside of that group or older than that group.

Celisa Steele (03:36):

It sounds like you have an amazing breadth and depth of experience with various aspects of this third sector of education. And the way we see it, that sector is made up of many different types of providers. There's trade and professional associations; there's corporate learning and development; there's academic continuing education; there are training companies; there are solo entrepreneurs. And so if you imagine a continuum and one end is labeled *hodgepodge* and one end is labeled *partnership*, what's the level of awareness that providers have in that sector of the other types of providers? Where on the continuum would you put the third sector, and where on the continuum should we be as the third sector?

Michelle Weise (04:24):

Yeah, it's a really good question. And it's something that has been nagging at me for many years, just because in a lot of my roles I've been privileged to sit sometimes in more of an objective bystander role, where I get to assess the landscape of a lot of these different providers. So when I was working with service members, I got a real view into a lot of different online post-secondary education. When I was working for the Christensen Institute, I got a lot of insights into all of the for-profit, the alternative learning providers out there, those entrepreneurs and social entrepreneurs. And the hardest thing for me to see was the duplication of efforts. There are so many incredible organizations and groups and services out there that are solving for the same problem, sometimes completely overlapping in their areas of interest, but they have no awareness of some of these other groups that are out there doing the same work.

Michelle Weise (05:27):

And so I've actually spent a lot of time doing this behind-the-scenes matchmaking of different entrepreneurs and organizations and trying to pull them together just so that they are aware of one another. And I think this is an issue we have more broadly in this sector, which is we have a lot of incredible groups who are building in silos or building in parallel to one another. And even across your first, second, and third sectors, if you think about K-12 and post-secondary education and everything after, these are very separate systems that don't do a great job of speaking across those boundaries. And one of those things that we've just realized over time is that we cannot continue to innovate in this way. It doesn't make sense to constantly reinvent the wheel. And so how do we behave differently? How do we work more as those kinds of partners and coalition partners and change our ways of doing things and make sure that we are functioning more like interdependent systems, things that are inextricably tied to one another? And that's, I think, what things like, in this particular moment, as we think about the pandemic's role in shaping the economy and how things lie today, this is the big opportunity ahead, is to think about how we actually move from those silos to true partnership and coalition building.

Celisa Steele (07:08):

I think what you said about duplication of effort definitely rings true—this idea that there can be, because of this siloed approach, multiple players really focused on the same type of work and really have no idea that they are duplicating that effort. And this idea of matchmaking, really recognizing interdependency, makes a lot of sense.

Celisa Steele (07:34):

Now our view at Leading Learning is that this third sector has been growing in size and importance in the past few decades. If you agree with that assessment, what do you think is contributing to that growth?

Michelle Weise (07:49):

I think you're right. If you just look for instance at the state of workforce technologies, you see, I think it was LearnLaunch who estimated that between 2015 and 2018 there were 250 brand-new companies that were backed by venture capital, creating an almost \$2.9 billion marketplace within just a few years. And so we do see this magnificent growth going on. I think part of the reason we're seeing that is because of the incredible noise in the marketplace. There's Credential Engine, who kind of came out with this number that we now have over 730,000 unique credentials just flooding our educational and labor markets. And so you would think that this offers a lot of options for learners, but what it does is it just creates so much friction between our job seekers and our companies that are seeking to hire talent. It is not necessarily getting any easier, so you see this growth of providers that are trying to create more pre-hire assessments or bring more clarity and transparency to highlighting a person's skills. I think we've realized, as an entire network of stakeholders, that just always relying on a degree as a proxy for talent is not sufficient. So you see all these different ways in which innovators and organizations are trying to make more direct connections between job seekers and employers, and I think that's where you see this tremendous growth happening.

Celisa Steele (09:49):

So when you think about the third sector, what do you see as some of the major opportunities for players in that sector?

Michelle Weise (09:58):

One huge opportunity is to reimagine the role of on-the-job training. I think over the last few decades, and Peter Cappelli does some good analysis of this, where he counts the number of hours that we used to devote towards engaging our workers in building new skills. And it went from 2.5 weeks per year in 1979 all the way down to only 11 hours per year by 1995, and we can only imagine from 1995 to now how much more that has been reduced. And all of that on-the-job training is not necessarily geared toward training our workers for new and emerging and better jobs. What it is about is more risk mitigation, compliance training, these sorts of boxes that we need to check off. And so the real opportunity ahead is to think through how in the world are we going to take our existing workforce, better understand the skills that they bring to the table, and help them skill up for the jobs of the future. The way in which we've engaged in the talent wars thus far is just not sustainable. It is this constant look outside of the company for talent instead of looking inward and trying to assess who we have today right at our fingertips that we can help acquire the right skills just to make it into those next jobs that we need to fill.

Michelle Weise (11:34):

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So that kind of look internal and a real reassessment of how we think about investing in our incumbent workforce, I think, is a huge opportunity for this entire space of entrepreneurs, for organizations, for trade associations to think through: “How do we do this better?”

Celisa Steele (11:56):

So, on the flip side of the coin then, what do you see as the major threats facing the third sector of education?

Michelle Weise (12:05):

The most critical, I think, limiting factor is that we have not figured out how to account for time. I think if anything what this pandemic has shown us is how important it is to be able to buy time to do other activities. And a lot of folks in our system are not earning a living wage in order to buy services that gain you time back. And as you think about these multi-hundred-million-dollar initiatives within some of these most forward-thinking employers that are thinking about upskilling folks, what they haven't actually solved for is when those workers are actually going to find the time to upskill. I think the implicit expectation is always that this person is going to go home after work and figure out a time to build those skills on their own. And it's always this individual burden, we don't figure out ways to carve out time in the flow of the workday to build those skills for our employees, and that really needs to change. If we really want to get serious about solving for intergenerational mobility, we really have to think about this issue of time poverty.

Celisa Steele (13:31):

Time is definitely a limiting factor—it is one that I feel every day myself. So when you think about the future of the third sector of education, what do you see? Are you anticipating continued growth? Are you seeing potential for disruption, whether that's positive or negative disruption? Waning importance? Something else? How would you characterize that future of the third sector?

Michelle Weise (14:00):

I think we're hitting a wall in terms of our traditional ways of doing things. So for quite some time, we have been relying on this phenomenon of up-credentialing, where we keep asking people for degrees. So we put in degree requirements for jobs that really used to never require a degree, and over time those degree requirements have gone up. We've been asking for more and more advanced degrees, and, as we can imagine, there just comes a limit to how many degrees we can ask for. We're moving into master's degree territory when some of these roles never needed a degree in the first place. And so what you're seeing is the lack of signaling power of some of our credentials. Employers don't know how to sift through their resumes; they don't know how to make sense of all these different kinds of factors. So that obviously cannot continue, so that's why you hear a lot more language these days around this notion of moving away from pedigree or where you learned your knowledge to thinking about skills and moving toward skills-based hiring. And that's partly because we cannot just continue to up-credential, and we have to get much more precise about skills.

Michelle Weise (15:26):

And I think the other piece of this that I kind of mentioned before is that we're hitting a wall in terms of these kinds of talent wars that we're engaging in, where we're always trying to find this specific spot talent that has the precise experience that we are looking for, as opposed to enabling their existing workforce or pools of talent that they wouldn't normally look to to

demonstrate that they can actually do some of this work. So I think we're just hitting this really important ceiling or wall where we can't go any further in the direction that we're going. And so we really are going to have to rethink our motivations for leveraging these sorts of practices. And to me it's an exciting shift toward skills-based hiring—but then we need better ways of surfacing those skills too.

Celisa Steele (16:27):

I'm hearing in what you're talking about a lot of potential for things like competency-based education—so it really is more about what the learner can do versus, as you were talking about, the pedigree sort of approach where it's more about the degree and where it came from to potentially be that proxy for talent versus actually being able to demonstrate what you know or what you can do as a learner. And I think, too, then back to your idea of the limiting factor of time, which of course speaks to the potential for something like microlearning, if it can be done in a meaningful way to really help deliver very targeted content that's going to help with that demand that we all feel on our time.

Jeff Cobb (17:15):

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Amanda Davis (17:21):

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Jeff Cobb (17:59):

We're truly grateful to Blue Sky eLearn for helping to make this series possible, and we encourage you to find out more at blueskyelearn.com. Now, back to the conversation with Celisa and Michelle.

Celisa Steele (18:15):

What words of advice do you have for those in the third sector about what they might be able to do to help them really thrive in that future that will come to be and this fact that we're potentially hitting these various walls? What can they do to try to break past that wall and to succeed and thrive?

Michelle Weise (18:41):

I think one of the core pieces of this shift towards skills-based hiring is a way for us to surface the skills of a job seeker or surface the skills of your workforce. You would be kind of surprised by how many major employers are out there, huge, even tech giants, who have hundreds of thousands of workers, and they regularly complain about not being able to understand what precisely their people can do. They have names and job titles, but they don't have that granular understanding about what precisely, what kinds of skills, capabilities, and assets each of those individuals brings to the table. So, as a result, they don't know how to look at their existing workforce in order to shape them for the jobs of the future. So a company may have three or

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five new strategic goals for 2025 or 2030, and their instinct is to look externally for that precise talent when in fact there could be hundreds or tens of folks right at their fingertips who are 70 percent of the way there in terms of the kinds of transferable skills they have that they could port over into this new domain. But we just don't have the mechanisms to do that.

Michelle Weise (20:08):

So there are really exciting innovations and artificial intelligence platforms that are trying to do some of this surfacing of skills, trying to illuminate skills gaps for folks as they try to imagine pathways for themselves, and also connecting those skills gaps to learning providers in the area or in the region that might be able to help them fill those gaps. So this opportunity of reflecting who these learners are today, and again as we think about more mature learners having to pivot and more mature workers having to transition to new work, we not only need that way of surfacing the skills that sound very marketable in the workplace, but we also need a way for job seekers to recognize that there's so much incredible informal learning that happens. And that they have these kinds of hidden credentials within that haven't been formally recognized by their degree or some certificate or certification, that they may have acquired through caring for their children, caring for an older parent or grandparent, or even driving a truck across the country many thousands of times. There are all these different kinds of skills that we have but we haven't learned how to surface them and articulate them. And that translation process is something this third sector has an opportunity to facilitate and help learners and workers translate their skills into the language of the marketplace.

Celisa Steele (21:52):

It seems like you were talking about difficulty on both sides, in terms of both the employers maybe not being as clear as they could be or should be about the skills needed and then too the potential employees not being able to capture their own skills and communicate those to the employer. So it seems like on both ends of that connection, employer and employee, that there's some work to be done around expressing the skills that are needed and the skills that are there.

Michelle Weise (22:31):

Yeah, there's just not a ton of transparency, and, even as we think about internal mobility within a company, it's really hard for most workers to understand the clear routes toward advancement. We don't do a great job of even providing those internal mobility pathways. And then, of course, as we think about career trajectories outside of the boundary of a company but across fields and across different companies and across state lines, we really don't do a great job of making those pathways clear. So that's one of the exciting things, as we think about big data and harnessing some of this data, is now we can actually see some of those trajectories, and we can start illuminating them a little bit more clearly for job seekers.

Celisa Steele (23:29):

Now, many learning businesses are focused on their customers, their members, their learners, and I think that's understandable—those are the people paying for and accessing their portfolio of offerings. But I know that part of what you're interested in and passionate about is making education work for learners who are often left behind and left out by traditional approaches and traditional players. So would you talk a little bit about nonconsumers in the context of lifelong learning? Who are they, and what might a learning business stand to gain by focusing on nonconsumers?

Michelle Weise (24:11):

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This term *nonconsumers* is from Clayton Christensen's theories of disruptive innovation, and it's just a term for the people whose alternative is really nothing at all. So, just as a really simple example, when Toyota started to come into the American car market, they produced this crummy little car called the Corona, and they were not producing it for the existing customers and consumers of cars, and they weren't trying to get someone who already owned a Cadillac to buy one of these Coronas. These were people whose alternative to a car was really nothing at all—it was walking or riding a bus. So even though this car was not as high-quality as some of the existing options on the market, these nonconsumers were actually perfectly delighted with the quality of these cars because it was better than nothing at all.

Michelle Weise (25:13):

So as we think about higher education today, it's this fascinating sort of phenomenon that's happening, where over the last 60 years, 70 years we've gone from having about 2,000 institutions to at one point over 4,700 degree-granting institutions. We're now down to about 4,300. We no longer have enough traditional learners to fill those seats, and the number of high school grads moving into post-secondary education has really dropped over time, and it's plateauing, and it's really going to drop dramatically in the mid 2030s. And so as we think about this idea of nonconsumers, these are people who might have already gone to college and dropped out, some of the 36 million with some college, no degree. These could be folks who only have a high school degree and absolutely no post-secondary education. But there are folks who could really stand to increase their earnings by acquiring some sort of education beyond what they have today.

Michelle Weise (26:22):

And as we think about nonconsumers, our traditional institutions are not doing a great job of inviting those folks in. In fact, when I was at Strada, we did a huge survey of close to 350,000 Americans, and in that population we looked at 55,000 learners who had some college and no degree, and the majority of those folks actually have no interest in coming back to post-secondary education, even though they knew it would help them advance in their work lives. And so these are the nonconsumers we are talking about. And so, for all the different kinds of organizations that are in this third sector, there's a real opportunity to think about meeting these specific learners where they are. These are not folks who are looking for a bundled four-year experience with a great sports team. These are people who are looking for precise, targeted educational pathways that have signaling power that an employer will understand and know how to make sense of that learning experience. These are short-burst human skills and technical skills building programs that move people along very quickly and cost effectively into a much better opportunity.

Michelle Weise (27:41):

And so that's how we should be thinking about this population of folks whose alternative is nothing at all and who are currently being left behind by the inadequacies of our education and workforce infrastructure.

Celisa Steele (28:08):

In your most recent book, *Long Life Learning: Preparing for Jobs That Don't Even Exist Yet*, you argue that we need a new learning ecosystem, and that ecosystem needs to incorporate five guiding principles. It has to be navigable, supportive, targeted, integrated, and transparent. And you write that, and this is a quote, "The connective tissue that unites these five guiding principles is a more robust data infrastructure." And so my sense from reading you is that the more robust data infrastructure is really key to getting beyond those silos and in getting to that

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meaningful collaboration in the third sector of education. Am I reading you correctly? Does that seem like a fair assessment in terms of the role of that data infrastructure?

Michelle Weise (29:01):

Yes. It is a foundational element to thinking about a better functioning ecosystem. And my use of this term *ecosystem* is very deliberate. If you just think about a forest, we tend to look at the things that are above ground. What we fail to notice is how interconnected and interwoven everything is underground. And there's this almost incredible kind of intelligent design and communication happening through the root system. And, as we think about our current education and workforce infrastructure, we are nowhere close to this kind of intelligence that occurs because of this kind of communication. Or, if we even compare where we are with groups like Amazon or Tencent or Netflix, they have these closed loops of data where they can continuously get smarter about our behaviors, our actions, our clicks.

Michelle Weise (30:02):

In higher education and workforce, none of our systems speak to one another. They are all deeply siloed. Some of them are illegal to access because of our federal ban on the student unit record. There are all kinds of things that get in the way of connecting important data that would help all of us make better decisions in the future. And so one fundamental aspect of bringing people together around a shared common agenda like re-skilling folks that have been hurt by the COVID-19 pandemic is you need to all be looking at that shared sheet of music, that same set of data. And so, as un-sexy as it may be, this piece of connecting data and doing the important work of plumbing and creating data trusts and data infrastructure is deeply important. And so groups, like Brighthive, out there that are doing this infrastructure work are foundational for all of these to build these new coalitions that will behave differently in the future.

Celisa Steele (31:11):

And so because you do make a really strong case for the need to break down these silos, to have this ecosystem where we really are able to take advantage of the data from one provider and feed that into what another provider is able to offer to a particular learner, do you have any advice on concrete actions that a learning business might take to bring about that less-siloed third sector, whether that's through exploring formal partnerships or data trusts or something else?

Michelle Weise (31:47):

Yes, I think I'm lucky enough to serve on the board of a group called SkillUp, and it is a coalition of a bunch of different funders out there, as well as alternative learning providers, as well as open access institutions and different groups, that are bringing to bear stuff that they have been building, but they realized that alone it's not going to be as powerful as actually bringing it into this shared platform experience. And so I think that the exciting thing about the urgency around reskilling people and helping them survive during this real challenge to our economy is that we've realized that we cannot just keep doing what we've been doing, that we do need to alter our behavior and create this sort of shared repository or shared commons.

Michelle Weise (32:47):

So I think that is one step, and it's a really difficult mindset shift for a lot of organizations to move from being leaders in the space, or thought leaders in the space, to being servant leaders or maybe even nameless and not getting the kind of recognition that they're used to getting.

This is a very different kind of way of engaging in the space, but it's clear that we cannot continue to make all of this burden of skill development the onus of the individual. Right now it's so clearly unjust in the way that all of us have to navigate a job transition alone and scramble and fumble our way through it. There's isn't a clear way to move seamlessly from one job to the next, and we really have to alter this because the number of job changes that we can expect in the future are only going to increase. Even early baby boomers are experiencing 12 job changes by the time they retire. So all of us can expect maybe 20 or 30 job transitions in the future, and we all know how difficult or sometimes how serendipitous it feels to land a job. We need to make that less idiosyncratic and less the exception to the rule and more the rule. Something that is clearly, easily accessible, seamless-feeling, and understandable.

Celisa Steele (34:35):

So it is hard for lifelong learners to understand and navigate the options—you say there's a lot of noise in this marketplace, so it's hard to figure out which options are trustworthy. And it seems like we're missing, to use your terminology, these easy, obvious on- and off-ramps. So what I wanted to ask you is, do you think an individual learning business has a responsibility or an opportunity to help learners navigate the broader third sector? And what might that help look like?

Michelle Weise (35:12):

Yeah, I do think it is high time that the onus spreads a little bit more fairly beyond just the individual job seeker onto our education providers, who need to have some more skin in the game and need to have some responsibility for the outcomes of their learners. And also the onus of training—employers cannot continue to retreat from training and expect these fully oven-ready people who are ready to contribute on day one. There has to be some shared responsibility there. One of the opportunities to solve in this space is if we really do want to give more people, especially folks who may not have a traditional post-secondary degree, if we want to give them more of a fair shot in the labor market, we need to figure out ways to mitigate risk for employers who do actually want to widen their talent funnels and also diversify their talent pools. Because if you actually do remove those degree requirements, you get to a much more diverse learner and worker population. But there needs to be a way for the employer to test out and allow for these workers and learners to prove what they know.

Michelle Weise (36:38):

So there's really exciting developments going on in different kinds of outsourced apprenticeship models, where, say, you go to one of these short on-ramp programs like Per Scholas or JVS or Tectonic or i.c.stars, and you gain some skills in cybersecurity or advanced manufacturing or healthcare. A lot of these groups that are building these alternative on-ramps are partnering directly with employers so they can let the employer test out these folks who are newly trained to see whether this person will truly be able to do the work. And so what happens is these on-ramps actually hire their participants as employees, and then their client employers get to try out these new candidates and see, "Oh my goodness, they can do everything that I need them to do." So this really does allow for that de-risking of a really challenging hiring practice where so many things can go wrong because we're just holding our finger to the wind praying that we're hiring the right talent versus performance-based or mastery-based demonstration of those skills.

Michelle Weise (37:52):

So I think that kind of validation of skills is just a real opportunity for the different kinds of providers in this space to come together to behave differently. If we want to be action-oriented

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in terms of diversifying and making our hiring more equitable, we need some of these mechanisms in place.

Celisa Steele (38:21):

And you are touching on something I wanted to ask about, which is this idea that if we move to more blinded, more skills-based hiring practices that that's going to help organizations really deliver on the promise of DEI initiatives—diversity, equity and inclusion—and really live that out in a practical way. And so I'm wondering how providers in the third sector who want to help that hiring be as unbiased as possible, what can they do, and how can they avoid having their credential, whether it's a certificate or a certification or a digital badge or whatever, become like so many degrees are today, just that proxy signal that doesn't necessarily provide an accurate view of the holder's ability or competence or knowledge?

Michelle Weise (39:13):

Yeah. I think it comes down to offering different kinds of ways for job seekers to prove what they know. So there are interesting kinds of new developments going on in AR and VR, virtual simulations where people can demonstrate through these simulated environments that they can actually do the work that is needed. There are also different kinds of pre-hire assessments that are promising, that really help us better understand a person's curiosity or critical thinking processes. There are groups like Imbellus who throw you into a natural simulated environment, and something dies, and your job is to figure out what happened, and all of your different kinds of clicks are being assessed, and there is this sort of psychometrician-validated work happening on the back end that gives us a better perspective on people's problem-solving skills, as an example.

Michelle Weise (40:24):

But the challenge is the number of pre-hire assessments that are out there today. It's pretty incredible. It's just, kind of, become the Wild West, and so it's really hard for hiring managers and employers to make sense of what is truly valid and what is not. It's also hard for employers to articulate exactly the skills they want for the future. Some of them say they need this whole laundry list of technical skills; others say, "No, I just need someone with these basic human workforce competencies like teamwork, collaboration, critical thinking." We use these words often and frequently, but we don't have a lot of ways to measure those qualities. And so another piece that we need to figure out is trying to get more researchers and academics also involved in the basic learning science around these principles that we say are so critical for the future of work.

Michelle Weise (41:30):

So it's sort of this whole mixture of things that needs to happen. We have some promising seeds of innovation budding on the margins, but we don't have a systemic way of being able to identify that talent. And so without recourse to anything truly reliable yet, we're just sort of sticking to the old ways of doing things.

Celisa Steele (41:58):

Well, one of the things I really admire about *Long Life Learning* is it really does make this case for not sticking with the old ways of doing things and pointing out some opportunities for where things could change in a meaningful way to really work better for everyone—for the learners, the employers, and just society in general. So I really appreciate that work.

Jeff Cobb (42:29):

Michelle Weise is author of *Long Life Learning: Preparing for Jobs That Don't Even Exist Yet*, which is recommended reading for learning businesses and which you can find through Amazon and other online book sellers. You can find Michelle online at riseanddesign.io, and you can connect with her on Twitter or LinkedIn. Her handle is [rwmichelle](#) on both platforms.

Celisa Steele (42:52):

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Jeff Cobb (43:02):

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Celisa Steele (43:19):

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Jeff Cobb (43:36):

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Celisa Steele (43:42):

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Jeff Cobb (43:53):

Thanks again and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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