



Leading Learning Podcast Episode 270

Ashish Rangnekar (00:00):

Seventy percent of learning happens on the job (experiential). Twenty percent is peer-to-peer. Ten percent is formal. What we have seen in the last couple of decades is most of the digital or the technology was focused on that 10 percent of formal educational programs. Finally, we're seeing that digital is driving all of it—not just formal, but social and experiential as well. And that shift just has opened up the market 10X.

Jeff Cobb (00:36):

I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:38):

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

Celisa Steele (00:45):

Welcome to episode 270 of the Leading Learning Podcast. This penultimate episode in our series on the frontiers of learning technology features a conversation with Ashish Rangnekar. Ashish Rangnekar is a self-described lifelong learner and co-founder and CEO of BenchPrep. BenchPrep has built what Ashish calls "a learning operating system," a full-stack learning platform that organizations can use to build and grow their learning business. BenchPrep's mission is to empower every organization to become a great learning organization and thrive in the new digital world order. With that mission in mind, for the last decade BenchPrep has been helping credentialing bodies, associations, and training companies digitally transform their learning business and deliver the best digital learning experience to drive outcomes and increase revenue. Jeff spoke with Ashish in March 2021.

Jeff Cobb (01:44):

Now, there are a lot of platforms out there, obviously, these days, and a lot of it's because of everything that's happened in the past year—there's even more interest in online learning and learning platforms. It's starting to feel a little bit, from my perspective, like the dot-com days, back when I got my start in e-learning, because a lot of investors are now interested in learntech. And I know they're interested in you, that you've got investors. I'm wondering, as somebody who's leading a learntech company, who's growing a learntech company, who has investors, what's different now in your opinion, if anything, about any of those past surges in learntech investment that we've seen? What's the opportunity that investors are seeing right now, especially in this adult lifelong learning market that we both serve?

Ashish Rangnekar (02:35):

I would say categorically this is an absolutely amazing and transformative time for a learning technology company and the industry as a whole. Even before we get to the specific interest in learning tech, I'll tell you a slightly different story. One of my favorite charts or trends to look at

*This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast
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when I talk about this is one that comes from the music industry. Ten years ago—and I wish I could show you the chart, but the audience can visualize this—10 years ago music streaming was less than 5 percent of music revenue. Today it is well beyond 80 percent. That is crazy to see just in 10 years. It's streaming revived the entire music industry. That was a solution that the modern consumer wanted, every label and every artist wanted. This is where I believe the education and training industry is today.

Ashish Rangnekar (03:37):

Less than 3 percent of all education spend is digital. I bet 10 years from now we're going to look at this chart and laugh at it and see how the industry has transformed in the last 10 years. So that's what the investors are looking at, essentially—they're going to see this transformation coming in. But let me answer your question directly. I've been doing this for a decade now, and I've seen three macro shifts that have happened in our society that's leading to this enormous potential and why I believe that 3 percent is going to jump to 80 percent in the training space. First is the Fourth Industrial Revolution. As a society, we are going through this massive transformation, one that is driven by technology, that is fundamentally changing the way we live, we work and relate to one another. That's the Fourth Industrial Revolution.

Ashish Rangnekar (04:34):

And finally, as a society, we have fully accepted and embraced it. And as this revolution unfolds, I believe that every professional, irrespective of the industry—healthcare, technology, finance—and every organization will have to retrain how they work and operate. So that's kind of the very macro shift that has happened in the last 10 years. That has led to the second one, which is very learning-specific, which is that finally lifelong learning has become an absolute economic reality. It's not a buzzword anymore. Because of this Fourth Industrial Revolution change we are seeing the likes of Amazon spending more than a billion dollars on upskilling and reskilling. AT&T spending billions of dollars. Now we're seeing that so much learning is happening beyond the traditional degree programs and higher ed. Big, true change and dollars are going towards lifelong learning. And that's a whole different world and whole new opportunity.

Ashish Rangnekar (05:44):

And then we come into the technology piece of it. And finally, we have entered an era of digital first, digital all, digital only learning. Jeff, everyone who like us have spent a lot of time in this space understands this 70-20-10 model of learning and development. Seventy percent of learning happens on the job (experiential). Twenty percent is peer-to-peer. Ten percent is formal. What we have seen in the last couple of decades is most of the digital or the technology was focused on that 10 percent of formal educational programs. Finally, we're seeing that digital is driving all of it—not just formal, but social and experiential as well. And that shift just has opened up the market 10X.

Ashish Rangnekar (06:39):

So you see the big Industrial Revolution driving the change, finally, lifelong learning becoming absolute economic reality. We are entering the world of digital first, digital all, digital only learning. All of this was already happening—and then the pandemic. We just accelerated everything by at least five years. So you look at all of this, and I'm actually not surprised at all that there is a lot of investor interest because the potential in the next 10 years is once in a lifetime.

Jeff Cobb (07:11):

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So you and I are talking as part of a podcast series that's going to be about the frontiers of learning technology. So we're very focused on what's going on out there. You've been hinting at this, but when you think about that phrase "frontiers of learning technology," what comes to mind for you?

Ashish Rangnekar (07:30):

Actually, Andy Grove's 10X concept comes to my mind. I'm a big fan of Andy Grove's management philosophy—he was the ex-CEO of Intel and a management guru, if you will. He wrote this book—I think it's called *Only Paranoids Survive* [it's actually titled *Only the Paranoid Survive*—and, in this book, he introduces this concept called 10X change or a 10X moment. It's a moment that signifies change that is so big, that all bets are off, change that is order-of-magnitude bigger than anything that we are used to. And when you said "frontiers of learning technology," that's what comes to my mind. What are the technologies, the concepts, the business models, the organizations that are leading such a 10X change in our industry? Those are those the frontiers.

Jeff Cobb (08:26):

And when you think about what's going on right now—obviously, a lot of developments in the world of learning, the world of learning technology, a lot of hype, a lot of buzz out there—what are some of the trends that you think have the most potential for really significant positive impact in the near future, say within three years or so?

Ashish Rangnekar (08:46):

I do agree that there is a lot of stuff going on. The one specific area where I feel we've only started to scratch the surface and that can drive order-of-magnitude, that 10X change that I was talking about is data. Our ability, our collective ability to leverage data, I think can truly transform our ability to drive learning and business outcomes. And not just there. I think if we leverage, if we collect, analyze, and deploy the right data models, it can bring equity and access to learning like never, never before. So I think that's one area I'm actually extremely bullish on. And, Jeff, it's all very interconnected. As things go digital, it's much easier to collect data. It's very clear that it has become very cheap to collect data over the last 10 years. Storage is cheaper. The technology has caught up where you can truly collect or store every click, every minute, every response for every single learning activity.

Ashish Rangnekar (09:59):

I still feel that we are in this first phase of that transformation, where everyone is focused on data collection, and we need to quickly get into the second phase of actually deploying insights back into the learning models. As we start doing that, I feel it's going to be much cheaper to create content, it's going to be much quicker to drive learning outcomes, and it's going to be much faster to innovate because we would know exactly where to innovate. So even when we go in and work with a lot of associations, our first—well, I wouldn't say first, but I think one of the important focus areas is how do we actually make sure that they are enabled on the data front? So I think all of the—I won't even say "hype"—all the technology developments happening in the area of AI and machine learning and data storage, to me, I think that is one trend that is going to create a massive impact in the near term, in the next three years.

Jeff Cobb (11:10):

There are a lot of things that look like they're going to have some serious, positive impact. There are also just a ton of shiny objects out there right now—a lot of things that are being hyped that

are potentially distracting us from doing the more important work. Are there any things on your short list that you wish we would stop focusing so much on this and get to the real work?

Ashish Rangnekar (11:30):

So, Jeff, I actually buy into the hype. I am that kind of a person. For me, I think a lot of these technologies, which someone else would consider hype, for me it's just a matter of prioritization and time. Even data, I would have said, five years ago, I would have kept it in—it's not a hype, but organizations should truly understand are *they* ready for this kind of technology or not? So when you say, "What are the shiny objects?" I would say it actually depends on the specific learning organization and what their goal is. I'll give you three very specific examples. I feel that there's a lot of really phenomenal work going on in the world of immersive technology for learning. And the specific examples are labs and simulations and augmented reality and so on.

Ashish Rangnekar (12:36):

And it's a spectrum of things, right? It starts with a little bit of interactive content, goes into one-dimensional labs, and then simulations, all the way to truly augmented reality. There's a concept called Gartner's Hype Cycle, where the specific piece of technology is in the cycle of commercialization. We work with associations that are fully ready to embrace augmented reality, based on where they are in their digital transformation lifecycle and the industry that they are in. While, on the other end, there are associations that are not even ready to fully take on labs and simulations because of the complexity of the industry that they are in.

Ashish Rangnekar (13:19):

I think, for me, this hype cycle depends on where you're at. I have seen really good implementations of simulations with some of our technology associations that we work with. On the other end, we have actually also seen some of the healthcare associations try their hand on these augmented reality or truly immersive technology solutions, which worked well in a smaller group but couldn't really scale. So literally we can actually go through each and every piece of interesting technology innovation happening, either it be personalization, AI, machine learning, either immersive technology, virtual events, and all of that would actually fall on that spectrum based on what the specific association and their needs are.

Jeff Cobb (14:06):

I think that's such a good point that it does really depend on where an organization is. We often talk in terms of the maturity of the learning business, where do they lie along a spectrum, and, of course, the ones that are more mature are going to be more ready to leverage what's now possible. And it makes me wonder. I made the reference and dated myself earlier saying that I sort of cut my teeth back in the dot-com days with e-learning, and back then we thought everything was going to change overnight, that it was going to go completely digital, that everybody's going to be learning online. And it took 30 years for that to happen. What's your thinking right now? We've obviously seen a big disruption in the last year, a lot of shifts online, but when you look forward from here, over the next three to five years, are most organizations ready for this? Are we going to see really breakthrough and disruptive innovation, or is it going to be more of that high expectations but maybe things aren't going to transform as quickly as we might be hoping they will right now?

Ashish Rangnekar (15:04):

Jeff, I feel humans, when it comes to innovation and change, I think we overestimate the time that it takes for truly disruptive, and we underestimate the time it takes for something that is just next to us. I think that's what is going to happen. I am betting on net-net overall disruptive

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innovation. No doubt. My answer would have been very different, maybe like 12 or 18 months ago, pre pandemic, but now it is very, very clear that we are definitely getting pushed in this direction. We have worked with associations that were not ready to change and actually almost took pride in not changing and not embracing truly disruptive change. And they have come full circle and heavily invested in it. So, net-net, I'm actually very convinced that it is going to be disruptive change. However, I think the way it is going to happen is going to be a step change.

Ashish Rangnekar (16:04):

What we are seeing right now is many of the associations fully understand that they would have to make big changes in terms of their learning technology, learning stack, the way they're going to operate, all the way to their business model. However, in some cases, the technology itself hadn't really fully caught up, and that catching up or that commercialization is going to take time. A perfect example of that is even a simple thing like video conferencing. It has been around for a while. Everyone knew that, "Hey, we're moving in a direction where peer-to-peer interactions over video are going to be critically important."

Ashish Rangnekar (16:44):

But we haven't really seen true innovation at scale in this particular space yet. What happened in the last 12 months is everyone moved online; everyone moved to Zoom, Skype, GoToMeeting, and so on. That level of scale and commercialization is going to yield much better innovation over the next 18 to 24 months. So those are the kinds of things where I feel from a mindset perspective, learning organizations and associations have begun to fully embrace it. And now there is enough scale or demand for it that technology companies are beginning to invest in it. And we're going to see that happen over the next 24 to 36 months, easy.

Jeff Cobb (17:28):

And if we look further out, let's say you're able to be a Dr. Who, if you're familiar with that show or listeners know who Dr. Who is, you can get in your police box and travel out in time, 10, 20, 30 years—pick your time horizon—but if you're able to really look out in the distant future, what's it look like? Are we wearing chips in our head that are feeding our learning stream into us? Or what's the real future learntech look like?

Ashish Rangnekar (17:50):

On that note, I'm actually a big fan of how they showed it in *Matrix*. You remember that scene where it's like, "Oh, I want to learn kung fu or martial arts" and get that injected. I wish we could get there. I wish we could get there. I think that'd be the best thing ever. And I think my reasoning for that is, to me, the impact of learning or the outcome is so important. And I wish, as an industry, we can actually start focusing more on the outcome than the process itself. But that's one just philosophical aspect of it. I feel one of the big, high-in-the sky wishes that I have is innovation around true peer-to-peer social learning. I think this is where we're going to see, if I look at maybe 15 to 20 years from now, I think technology can make a big difference in the way we learn from each other.

Ashish Rangnekar (18:45):

Learning at the core is a very social activity. We learn way more from each other—talking to each other, watching each other—than anything else. And that two-way interaction, I feel that it's evident in the events that we attend, the conferences, the interactions over videos, and so on. But I don't think it has reached the scale that it needs to in the digital world. I think right now we are still living in a world where social learning is an enabler to, like me, learning from one

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particular instructor, or me learning from a book, or me learning from a digital course. It's a mindset like blockchain has. It's kind of completely decentralized.

Ashish Rangnekar (19:31):

It's actually all in small nodes and small bits and pieces and multiple computing sites. I think that is something that's going to happen in the world of learning where I'm actually not really tethered to one particular instructor or one particular provider or one particular course, but I'm actually learning from bits and pieces from every single interaction that is going on in almost every facet of my life with every single individual. This decentralization and peer-to-peer learning is that kind of high-in-the-sky futuristic kind of wish I have.

Jeff Cobb (20:07):

I like that, and it's interesting—certainly that's something that can be enabled, supported by technology, can greatly benefit from technology. It's also, I find, just such a mindset shift because people are so, it's so ingrained that we equate learning with education. We equate it with formal education, with classes, with courses, with seminars, with conferences. But what you're saying reflects the reality, which is learning is happening all the time, everywhere. And if we can have that mindset shift and have the technology to support that mindset shift, that's a huge leap forward.

Celisa Steele (20:45):

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Joe Miller (20:53):

BenchPrep is a pioneer in the modern learning space digitally transforming professional learning for corporations, credentialing bodies, associations, and training companies for over a decade. With an award-winning, learner-centric, cloud-based platform, BenchPrep enables learning organizations to deliver the best digital experience to drive learning outcomes and increase revenue. The platform's omni channel delivery incorporates personalized learning pathways, robust instructional design principles, gamification, and near real-time analytics that allow organizations across all industries to achieve their goals. More than 6 million learners have used BenchPrep platform to attain academic and professional success. BenchPrep publishes regular content sharing the latest in e-learning trends. To download our latest e-books, case studies, white papers, and more, go to www.benchprep.com/resources.

Celisa Steele (21:53):

We're truly grateful to BenchPrep for helping to make this series possible, and we encourage you to find out more at benchprep.com/resources. Now, back to the conversation with Jeff and Ashish.

Jeff Cobb (22:07):

When you think about getting this right, near-term and long-term, what's the good that can come out of a better understanding of learning in general but then specifically learning technology and what learning technology is going to hopefully make possible for us? What are the beneficial outcomes if we get that right?

Ashish Rangnekar (22:27):

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At the highest level, if we get that right, we truly elevate human potential. That's what is at stake. Truly sounds philosophical, but that is the impact of learning and training. I am the living and breathing example of it. I come from a small town in India, where I grew up, I had a comfortable life, but I would say nothing compared to being the CEO of a fast growing technology company with an office in Willis Tower in Chicago. A lot of people helped me to get here, but one of the key factors was access to the right education, training, and learning throughout, not just formal but informal, lifelong, and so on. And that is what is possible. And going back to the post Industrial Revolution piece of it, it's not just a buzzword anymore.

Ashish Rangnekar (23:27):

Today, millions and millions and millions of people all across the world—and I would say hundreds of millions of people all across the world—have to change their jobs, their way of thinking, have to learn, unlearn, relearn, upskill, reskill over the next 10 years. The economy and the society needs it. So if we get this right, if we can truly leverage technology to drive change and drive learning outcomes at scale, we're talking about having a tremendous impact on GDP, which leads to tremendous impact on overall lifestyle, of standard of living of every human out there, and then make individual satisfaction.

Ashish Rangnekar (24:14):

I truly believe that every human wants to learn and do better in life. And learning is an enabler towards that. People learn, people go through training so that they can get a better job. They want a better job so that they can maybe potentially earn better, take care of their family, and all of this starts with actually helping them in their learning outcomes. And, finally, they arrive at a point where technology, which is a true enabler of that, can make the difference. So that's what's at stake. We can truly elevate human potential and have an impact at a macro scale if we can get learning technology right.

Jeff Cobb (25:01):

And now I'm wondering if there's a potential downside or even dark side as well. You brought up the *Matrix* earlier, which it's really cool when you can plug in the training and learn kung fu or learn how to fly a helicopter, but, obviously, there's a huge dark side to the *Matrix* as well. When you're talking about impacting people's minds, not just knowledge and skills, but behaviors and attitudes, things can go wrong. You could imagine that there might even be, maybe not something as dark as the *Matrix*, but sort of rich-get-richer side to this, where the people who figure it out and get access to the learning and learn how to capitalize on the technology, their potential goes up, but maybe all boats don't go up at the same rate. How might we get this wrong? What do we need to be cautious about as we move forward?

Ashish Rangnekar (25:45):

Great question. I think there are three—and I've been thinking about this a lot—I think there are three areas of concern in this "how are we going to get this wrong." First is, I think, what you talked about, which is the power of AI and data and would that lead us in a direction which we don't want to go? Second is this enormous consolidation of power, which we've actually seen that in the big tech industry, with the Facebooks and the Googles and the Amazons of the world. I am most concerned about the third piece—and I'm not saying the first two are not that important—third piece, which is, I feel if we don't get the learning technology right, then, in a broad way, society or the learning organizations would be pessimistic about the impact and would be slow to adopt it, which will actually take us in a direction in which we don't want to do.

Ashish Rangnekar (26:44):

So I'm worried that, in the hype of all this, if organizations are not diligent about how do they truly leverage or deploy learning technology, do it in a suboptimal way, leading to suboptimal or not intended results, and then just back off of it. And if they do that, then I would say all of the "getting it right" piece that we talked about, we're going to have a hugely negative impact of it. We are going to leave hundreds of millions of people behind because learning technology couldn't really scale to provide them with the equity and access, and lack of that would lead to whole new set of economic and social problems. If you look at the last 10 years, I think that's where the issue has been. We get into these hype cycles—and we talked about the hype cycles.

Ashish Rangnekar (27:44):

Not that the actual piece of technology is not good enough or incorrect. It's how do we actually truly deploy it in a way that can drive change? And if that is not happening appropriately, then brute technologies get shoveled, and we just go back to our old ways. And the kind of change that we are seeing right now with technology, going back to the old ways would just not cut it. We are going to leave people behind. It creates all kinds of social, economical, political problems, and it's not good for anyone. That's what I would consider getting it wrong.

Jeff Cobb (28:28):

So if I'm a decision maker at a learning business listening to you right now talk about what the possibilities are, what the potential pitfalls are, I'm trying to make decisions for my learning business—my trade or professional association, my training firm, my continuing education division, whatever it is, wherever it is that I'm doing my work—what advice do you have for that person, for that learning business that wants to effectively use learning technology and decide, "Right now where should I focus? Where should I invest in the near term to help ensure the greatest success going forward?"

Ashish Rangnekar (29:07):

Jeff, first I would say that professional associations and learning organizations are at a very, very critical point. There is so much opportunity ahead for them that it's insane. And we talk to hundreds of associations and learning organizations all the time. It's very clear that we are in the, I call it second inning of a nine-inning game. This transformation is only beginning, and there is so much opportunity and potential in front. And I say all this to highlight that, as these learning executives are thinking about learning technology or just how their business evolves, they got to be thinking long-term. With that in mind, I have three pieces of advice or, generally, three big considerations I would request learning executives to think through. First is goal. As they start on this journey to figure out how do they effectively use learning technology, they got to ask themselves what are they trying to solve?

Ashish Rangnekar (30:15):

Are they trying to optimize what they have, or are they truly trying to digitally transform? Those are two very different goals, leading to very different process and outcomes. I am a firm believer of the fact that if you think long-term, you have to go through this digital transformation sooner than later. In fact, every technology company has to transform every five years. But, having said that, it has to start with a very candid view into what exactly the goal is. Is it a transformation, or is it optimization? So, that's first. Second is you got to truly identify what are the triggers of this change. What is happening around you that is actually causing this change? And I think this is where that 10X moment comes in. You might want to transform, but it's not just an inside-out transformation; it's also outside-in.

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Ashish Rangnekar (31:14):

How is the market changing? How are the customer behaviors changing? How is the industry changing? How is the competitive set changing? I've seen a lot of associations and training companies change due to challenges that are internal to them. And that's a good starting point, but, if you're going to go on to pick a learning technology or pick a learning platform or just make these transformative decisions without understanding the 10X changes happening around you, it's going to be suboptimal. So that's the second one—understand and identify these 10X changes around you, which leads to the trigger points, why are you even looking to use a learning technology? And the third piece is the solution. I'm a firm believer that, irrespective of you trying to optimize or transform or what the trigger points are, when it comes to the solution, it's not about one tool or one platform, it is about the technology stack that you put together. Now we as a company, BenchPrep, we have what I considered one of the best learning platforms out there.

Ashish Rangnekar (32:28):

But it's still a piece of the puzzle. Associations and training companies have to design their technology stack. That's the solution. All of us, all of the platform providers and other vendors, are part of that solution. We are the enablers, not the solution. So that's the third piece of advice. Start with the entire technology stack, and work backwards from it to figure out what learning platform, what learning technology, what vendor, what LMS fits into it, not the other way around.

Jeff Cobb (33:02):

I think that is so important. We always stress with everything we do that really starting with strategy, having those goals in mind as you're saying, knowing clearly what the situation is, what you're trying to solve for, and having an idea of how to solve for that, and then bringing technology to bear in that, and as you noted, it's typically going to be multiple technologies. It is going to be that stack that you're going to be working with. So thanks so much for sharing your perspectives, Ashish. You're out there on the front lines, in the learning technology world, so it's great to have the many different perspectives you're able to bring from working with so many different types of learning businesses.

Celisa Steele (33:45):

Ashish Rangnekar is co-founder and CEO of BenchPrep. BenchPrep offers a learning operating system, a full-stack learning platform that organizations can use to build and grow their learning business. Ashish is passionate about learning and would be happy to talk lifelong learning, professional development, learning technology, and anything in between. You can connect with him directly at ashish@benchprep.com.

Jeff Cobb (34:10):

We encourage you to visit BenchPrep's Web site to learn more about what they offer, and they make many resources available at benchprep.com/resources. We link to those resources in the show notes for this episode that you can find at leadinglearning.com/episode270, along with a transcript of my conversation with Ashish.

Celisa Steele (34:30):

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Jeff Cobb (34:46):

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Celisa Steele (35:01):

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Jeff Cobb (35:11):

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

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