



Brandon Carson

A leader and strategic driver focused on organizational and team success

Brandon Carson is a leader and strategic driver focused on organizational and team success with 20 years experience in learning and development. Amongst his many skills, he manages, designs, and delivers learning solutions to help companies articulate their message, inspire their audience, and improve their organizational performance. He believes that “Crafting an authentic learning experience that is relevant, contextual, and meaningful will lead to higher retention and, hopefully, improved performance”.

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Interview with Brandon Carson

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Following your 20 year experience in the field of education and development, what do you perceive as the secret element for a successful team?

The most successful teams I've been a part of have had an

open, collaborative construct, and are focused on transparency and teamwork. The other element that drives a highly productive team is smallness. Small teams with a clear focus and enough autonomy to make decisions in a timely manner are key. The secret sauce, however, is ensuring everyone has clear directives and can execute on their own as well as in concert with each other.

We all need to have personal goals to attain, as well as a common understanding of the overall vision for the team.

What are the responsibilities of a Learning Strategist?

As you know, our industry has undergone quite a large transformation over the past few years. I've been fortunate to be involved in this business for quite some time, so I often take a "long view" of the learning industry. Having said that, I do see that there is more of a focus from the

business to view learning as a valued partner in driving the overall strategy, and an expectation that evidence of either the success or failure of that strategy will be visible based on our ability to measure and evaluate the effectiveness of our interventions. In the past, most organizations that created a learning function were larger enterprises – usually with sales of \$100 million or more, per se, but now you see companies of every size placing an increased value on learning as a separate function capable of driving awareness, customer adoption, and even marketing. In that vein, it's critically important for a learning strategist to take both a strategic vision and a tactical focus to deliver real, measurable business value. Probably the most important function in any learning business today is the ability to gather, analyze and interpret the data available through the various channels of delivery they engage in – so much of this “deep data” available because of technologies such as Google Analytics. You'll see much more emphasis on data analysis competencies in high-functioning learning organizations as we move forward.



Could you describe your design philosophy in a few words?

Simply, “innovative, yet actionable” is my basic approach to learning experience design. Engaging audiences across multiple dimensions: intellectual, emotional, psychological, and at times physical is necessary to craft an authentic learning opportunity that’s meaningful and, hopefully, will lead to increased retention and improved performance. I also think it’s important to keep a razor-sharp focus on simplicity. The biggest challenge you have as a designer is

to achieve credibility. Learners in this age have high expectations when entering a content experience – they expect it to be intuitive, bend to their needs, be individualized and provide a quickly discernible “return on their time investment”.

I would say right now, being an effective instructional designer is not an easy job!

What would you advise an 18-year-old who is now entering the market and want to deal professionally with eLearning?

I think it's important to learn the fundamentals: focus on the psychology of how people learn, get a deep understanding of what motivates people to acquire knowledge, and, naturally, become fluent in the behaviors people exhibit when learning something new. Added to that is learning technology. It's almost impossible to enter our

field without becoming knowledgeable about how learning is delivered, and more and more it's delivered with technology. A healthy understanding of present-day tech as well as keeping constant awareness of emerging tech is key. Identifying trends and being able to sniff out the ones that will stick from the ones that will quickly fade is important as well. At the end of the day, you want to stay focused on how to deliver the most value for the business you support, so being flexible and nimble is important, because technology is moving at a very fast pace. Just ask the folks who spent a lot of time and energy on Second Life and Virtual Reality.

How can eLearning drive the sales of a company on the rise?

Learning is a critical element across several dimensions, but two key ones are product knowledge and customer service. Having employees that are both knowledgeable about what your business does combined with the ability to provide top

customer service is a must. Today, customers are savvier and smarter in a lot of ways. Many conduct a lot of research before deciding to engage with your company. And of course, we all know the power of social media in researching a company and responding to how you were treated by the company. A high-functioning company must have a well-trained staff. Without it, you're doomed. A good case in point is a software provider I worked with a few years ago – they combined their sales, marketing and learning functions to provide a comprehensive customer experience from awareness to adoption to integration of the service. Although it was a very small company (less than 60 employees) with only 300-400 customers, they were early adopters in understanding that learning plays just as important a role in customer satisfaction and sales as any other function.



What is the competency level of the participants you train? Does it rise up over the years?

This varies. Typically a learning function has to “deal” with what the business brings them in regards to capability. I’ve advocated for years that learning functions should be more aligned with talent acquisition and talent management. It’s

really critical on the acquisition front, though. If your focus is employee training, you need to be able to allocate resources, budget and strategy toward ensuring the business has the talent to appropriately execute on the strategy. You see this alignment more and more in European companies. American companies have been slow to foster a deeper collaboration between talent acquisition and learning, but it's critical not only with "knowledge workers" but also with other types of workers. In many cases the only human interaction a customer has with a company is via hourly workers who are more and more part-time, lower-wage folks.

Gaining a deep understanding of what motivates workers across all levels is fundamental to ensuring a good outcome for the business.

You also specialize in game based learning. How

important are games in the learning procedure?

Early in my career, I met up and began working with Thiagi. He showed me the power of game mechanics and the value of fostering a more fun learning environment. He was a pioneer in the construction of more empathic, hyper-individualized learning. It has taken years for the business to see the value in integrating game mechanics into not only learning, but also the way we work in general. My basic philosophy revolves around ensuring the learning environment is conducive for integrating games; a cultural “fit” for games; and that there’s the potential for a measurable return on value. As we move to less formal learning interventions and more informal ones, I rely on game mechanics to help engage and motivate learners to participate. The reality is designing a learning game that will result in “real impact” is not easy. There’s a delicate balance between “too much game” or “too much learning”, so you have to be very careful. I would argue that it’s impossible to design a good learning game if you’re not a gamer yourself. You have to understand the basic

components of play and what mechanics will result in engagement and measurable outcomes. And if anyone tells you they're "cheaper to create" than other types of learning, I would say turn and run fast. With anything, the more "cinematic" your design becomes, the more expensive it is to create. Period.

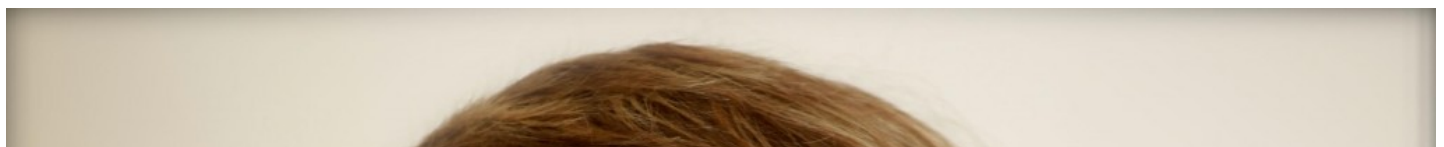
How has the social media changed the way we deal with eLearning?

In some ways the advent of social media has democratized learning and created a multi-channel dialogue between learners, designers, and others that want to be engaged in helping each other. The tools that have come about since the rise of the Internet have completely revolutionized how interact with each other. However, I'm a bit more skeptical with the idea of the "wisdom of the crowd". I firmly believe there are levels of expertise and there are, indeed, best practices for many things that are best modeled from expert to novice and all levels in between. I've studied Alex

Rodriguez's hitting form for years, and view him as an "expert" with a "best practice" in baseball. He's a natural – but novice's can learn from how he does what he does. In learning, there is still nothing better than receiving coaching from an expert. So, I think the "crowd" brings imminent value to the discussion, but expertise still matters much more. And social media has been an integral utility in exposing more expertise to those of us that crave it.

What are the principals of an effective collaborative learning environment in terms of design?

In my opinion, there are four behaviors you want to strive for when crafting a collaborative learning environment: attention, motivation, participation, and retention. You'll do this by creating a learning ecosystem built on mutual trust and engagement, understanding and flexibility, and through the encouragement of shared experiences.





What does it take for a company to implement and integrate emerging technologies?

A lot of it determines on a company's size and its overall goals. I think every learning function needs a healthy "R&D" department, but it's also important to deliver a consistent learning experience. Anyone in our field today should be focused on a "mobile first, cloud first" strategy as our workforces become untethered. If you're not already thinking this way, you're behind. Even if you're not delivering mobile, you need to be thinking about it, because in the next 5 years more people will be typing on glass than keyboards.

Do you think eLearning will gradually replace the traditional method of teaching?

Well, it's called the "Socratic Method" for a reason, right? J. I'm a technologist that firmly believes in integrating appropriate technology at the appropriate time, but for

humans, there's nothing better than learning from other humans face to face. That will never change. I'm not a big advocate for the idea of the "flipped classroom", but I think it's incumbent upon us to try new ways to engage with each other in learning.

Learning is the most basic human trait, and we will always be looking for ways to more deeply connect with each other in how we learn.

How do you imagine yourself in 20 years from now?

Retired! And living in Key West, reclining on the beach reading the New York Times!

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