Executive Interview

2021

NovoEd

Founded at Stanford's Social Algorithms Lab in 2012, NovoEd provides a capability-building platform that combines social and collaborative learning to unlock human potential at scale, with measurable impact.

CHARLIE CHUNG

*Vice President,
Business Development
NovoEd*

RACHEL COOKE

*COO and Podcast Host
Brandon Hall Group*

About NovoEd

Large-scale enterprises such as 3M, GE and Nestle partner with NovoEd to accelerate their business-critical initiatives with cohesive and engaging learning experiences that place each learner at the intersection of perspective, application and expertise. Ideal for context-driven and cross-functional domains that require a fusion of human and technical skill, NovoEd powers learning that is deeply felt and experienced and swiftly transformed into impact.

About Charlie Chung

Charlie Chung is VP of Business Development at NovoEd, the leading capability-building platform provider. After a career in management consulting, Charlie joined NovoEd six years ago, where he works with industry-leading training businesses and executive education providers to develop and deliver high-value online training solutions to their clients. Charlie holds an MBA from the University of Michigan.

About Rachel Cooke

Rachel Cooke is Brandon Hall Group's Chief Operating Officer and Principal HCM Analyst. She is responsible for business operations, including client and member advisory services, marketing design, annual awards programs, conferences and the company's project management functions. She also leads Advancing Women in the Workplace and Diversity and Inclusion initiatives, research and events. Rachel worked in the HCM research industry for 15 years and held several key management and executive positions within the Talent and Learning Research, and Performance Improvement industries.

Brandon Hall GROUP

RACHEL

Can you tell us a little bit more about yourself and some of your experience in the Learning industry?

CHARLIE

I switched over to the Learning industry about 10 years ago. Prior to that, I was in management consulting and did a lot of sales, marketing and consulting work. In consulting, you work a lot on your clients' problems. I realized that they didn't necessarily coincide with what I was interested in. I found as I looked back at my career, I was always involved in learning and in training, either developing it for clients or for internal purposes. It was a passion of mine. I then dove into a lot of research. This was around the time when MOOCs became popular. I became excited about the potential to do things online that go beyond solo learning experiences. I found my passion was looking for. That's how I got involved with NovoEd. I'm excited and passionate about new ways of learning new ways of teaching and trying to keep in mind actual learning science principles. Unfortunately, the Learning industry is prone to overblown fads where I feel that some people take a germ of a good idea but go way overboard with it. It doesn't do justice to what that pedagogical concept can do or to the learning science that's behind it.

RACHEL

What are some of the fads that you feel are just not going to have longevity?

CHARLIE

In the learning technology space, I find almost everything that is a major buzzword is typically overblown and people tend to look at it as a panacea. The buzzwords change frequently. Some are still popular, but things such as microlearning, personalized learning, reinforcement, learning, social learning — a lot of these things have powerful concepts behind them but they've been captured and limited to a certain definition. Oftentimes, it's by vendors that stake their service or technology upon those concepts. They tend to define it in a very specific way, and the industry just kind of goes along with that definition and says, "Oh, yeah, microlearning is like this, but it's not like that. Personalized learning is like this and not like other things." I am sure a lot of learning professionals feel the same way that I do about this, especially those who look to the learning science. The underlying principles that the fads are based on are powerful, but they are not the same as vendors and companies are trying to define them today.

RACHEL

What is the solution?

CHARLIE

We need holistic solutions in combination, not point solutions. Point solutions, they hang their hat on a certain approach. Take, for example, microlearning. Microlearning is foundationally a great concept in that we absorb information and small packets one at a time, and they kind of build on each other. People know about the research around the deliberate practice for skill-building and all sorts of things. But somehow these technology platforms have defined microlearning to fact-based recall. They draw on the research with K-12 students around the Forgetting Curve. If you're trying to memorize the rules of math, that kind of microlearning absolutely makes sense. But when you talk about the kind of skills that organizations are trying to apply now, how to be a great coach, how to be a better leader, what does it mean to be customer-centric or those higher-level skills, the microlearning is still stuck in the fact-based recall. But it's still based around this paradigm, recalling facts. There's so much more potential with microlearning to break up things in smaller sequences, to provide nudges, to provide reinforcement, to scaffold, to build up to something bigger and richer and deeper. But this requires bringing in and incorporating more concepts than just microlearning — yet if there is a class of "microlearning platforms," it is natural that they pitch themselves as solving a problem all by themselves as a point solution.

RACHEL

How can you understand what kind of skills that you're training for?

CHARLIE

When you look at Bloom's Taxonomy and higher levels of learning engagement, learning is supposed to ladder up to become more holistic, applicable and relevant. People need to stay engaged in a sustained way to build skills in a sequence that makes sense for them.

(continued)

Another fad that is very dominant out there is this sort of learner-centered portal, where there's 10,000 learning objects and we're going to present people with a search bar; it's like a Google search. You must have heard this a thousand times, Netflix-style learning, where this amazing recommendation engine is going to put things in front of you. Just like *The Squid Game*, it is going to captivate people's attention; you're just presented with these amazing learning objects. There are a lot of challenges with that model. Now, I'm not against having a portal with recommendations; I think AI technology is going to get better over time. If you're just jumping about from learning object to learning object, they don't necessarily have any connection to each other. You're trying to grow and sustain certain skills and advance upon that scale. People confuse entertainment and learning. You can't just present people with a Netflix-style interface and expect them to be able to pursue all their development goals. We know about the paradox of choice. If you present people with 10,000 options, you might as well be presenting with them 50 million options. It's just choice overload.

> Personalized learning is another term that's been co-opted. **Personalized learning** now is defined as there's no person involved, it's automated, there's an algorithm, an AI-driven engine that's personalizing things to the individual.

That's unfortunate because there are other ways to personalize learning that are very important. This can be a mix of what a person's manager suggests or what peers suggest. That is much more personalized than just saying, "We've got great algorithms and this is going to solve our problems."

On a quick side note, one of the hobbies I've picked up in the pandemic is playing online chess. For a long time, computers could not play at the level of top grandmasters — not even close. And then there was a seminal moment in 1996, where IBM's Deep Blue beat Garry Kasparov. But then came a period when computer-assisted humans were the best combination, and could beat the top computers in chess. That lasted for quite some time, a decade or more. We've reached the point where now computers are so good that they're even better than computer-assisted humans. It was a journey for AI; The computers weren't as good, then they were better than unassisted humans but they weren't better than computer-assisted humans. Now, they are better than anything that can be put up against them. It's the same thing. We're very much in the infancy of AI in the Learning sphere and we're certainly at the point where humans are better than the algorithms right now and computer-assisted humans may be even better.

(continued)

We probably will go through the phase where we have this hybrid. Maybe the employee's manager gets an assist from an algorithm that says here are three different types of learning paths that people in your direct reports benefit from, and then the manager uses their judgment to pick the right one. They say, "Track B looks good. Not only am I going to recommend it, I'm going explain to the person why this set of skills is important." That's what an algorithm is not good at providing; it doesn't tell you the justification. At some point in the future, the computers will be better than humans, but we're a couple of steps removed from that.

> We should just keep in mind when we talk about personalized learning; there are a lot of **opportunities** out there.
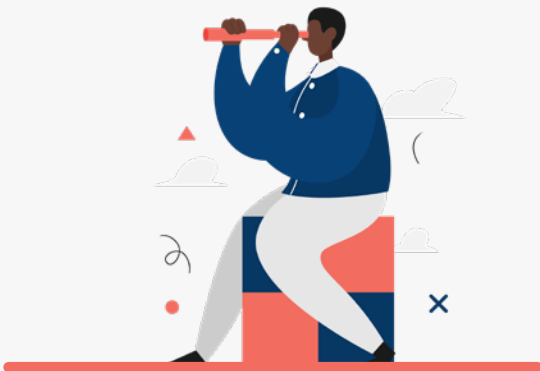
RACHEL

How can people learn and be able to adjust and adapt to the new world?

CHARLIE

The key is finding that balance between adapting, having a foundational base and knowing when to apply each. If your learning leaders are competent and doing their job, your organization can be pliable in developing and adapting the skills for the future.

There's so much technological change out there. It's transforming every industry. That's part of the reason why there are fads out there; there is this constant sense, not just on the Learning and Human Capital side of the house, but also from the executive leadership and business units, that there has to be better ways of doing things with all of the new technology out there. We also need to understand that we, as human beings, evolve very slowly. We still have habits that are harking back to evolution from 50,000 years ago. As a species, we don't change very quickly. That's why we need to hearken to the learning science to tell us about things that are core for us as humans.

(continued)

What is it that motivates and drives us? What is it that causes us to understand and grasp things? There's so much there that we already know about to ourselves, and that part is not going to change in the next 10 or 20 years. Techniques can change but they've got to access the same underlying pathways. That's why we need to find this balance between being open and adaptable.

For learning leaders, it's their responsibility to bring people back to Earth and say that sounds great, but that's not the way people are. A great example of that is this concept of cognitive load. It's harder to learn things when you're processing lots of different things. Over the past 20 years, there was definitely a time in the not-too-recent past where everybody wanted to animate everything and put in flashing and buzzing. People picked up on the video trend and said, "Hey, my employees play Angry Birds for 2 hours. Why can't I make my learning like Angry Birds?" If you look at it from a foundational standpoint, this is not great for cognitive load. It might be entertaining, but are we allowing the space for people to absorb something? The same is true with learning platforms. There's a welcome move toward simplicity whitespace. They're not trying to capture your attention with six different sections with a panel of thumbnails that are flying by. You have to keep these fundamentals in mind as you embrace the potential for better techniques.

Q **RACHEL**

Is there anything else that you'd like to share?

A **CHARLIE**

I have been talking about how fads are overblown but I'm not trying to disparage the learning technology space. This is to be expected when things are in flux and disruption abounds. There are a lot of new ideas so things are going to be a little bit chaotic. People should focus on Adult Learning concepts. A lot of research that we have comes from childhood learning and this is not always applicable to working adults. For adult learners, we know that what's important are things such as context, meaning, connection and relevance. You need to think about motivation, engagement, reputation — all these other human factors. As we move to the future, it's certainly an exciting time.

(continued)

There are a lot of different techniques and tools now that are available. People are more engaged digitally, especially with a pandemic, and have accelerated by four or five years in terms of adoption and willingness to adapt. The overarching point is, let's not look at technology as the solution in and of itself. We are all humans. We adopt different techniques, but we need to take that human side into account. All of us need to be better read on cognitive science and human psychology. That's key in understanding how people are going adapt to a particular technology, and we should not just focus on building the latest and greatest technology for its own sake.

great success and it will be written up in a case study. Oftentimes, you come back later and it fizzled out or it ultimately didn't work. If you're trying to improve things in your organization, you want to take a very pragmatic view and make solid choices that evolve your organization in a reasonable and accessible way.

Q RACHEL

There are a lot of different approaches and theories. How do you bring this home?

A CHARLIE

I've seen successful learning leaders in different organizations and the styles and approaches that they take. The ones who have a high-percentage of successful initiatives and projects have a hard-hitting, practical, end-user-focused pragmatism about them. They're not easily wowed by the bells and whistles. For those who do go for the bigger bells and whistles, it can be hit or miss. Sometimes they'll have a

To Listen To The Interview On Brandon Hall Group's HCMxRadio

CLICK HERE