



Executive Interview



Why Learning Leaders Need to Stop Bolting AI Onto Old Workflow

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Instructure.



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About Instructure



Instructure is an education technology company founded in 2008 by two Brigham Young University graduate students, Brian Whitmer and Devlin Daley and headquartered in Salt Lake City, Utah. The company is best known as the maker of Canvas, the most widely used learning management system in United States higher education and has expanded into assessment, credentialing and corporate learning through products including Mastery, Parchment and Canvas for Corporate Education. Instructure serves K-12 schools, higher education institutions, businesses and government agencies, with customers including Brigham Young University, the Wharton School of Business and Auburn University.

About Zach Pendleton



Zach Pendleton is Chief Architect at Instructure, where he works across the research and development organization to translate customer needs into technology strategy. With more than a decade of experience in education technology, he collaborates with educators around the world to extend education's reach and improve the impact of education technology and is a frequent speaker, podcast guest and author on the subject. His current research areas include generative AI's impact on education, digital credentialing and edge computing. He holds a bachelor's degree in English literature from Utah State University and a J.D. from Brigham Young University's J. Reuben Clark Law School.

About David Wentworth



This Executive Interview is moderated by **David Wentworth**, Managing Director of Learning and Talent at Brandon Hall Group™, a role he returned to after serving as Vice President and Talent Platform Evangelist at Schoox. He previously spent 11 years at Brandon Hall Group™ as Principal Analyst and his insights draw on nearly two decades of research, interviews and data analysis in the learning and talent space, including a prior role as a senior analyst at the Institute for Corporate Productivity.

Listening First, Strategy Second

Q David

Can you explain what it means to be a chief architect and what you're doing at Instructure?

A Zach

My job begins with listening to what our customers want, what challenges they have and what's happening in the classroom, then mapping that back into a technology strategy that accomplishes those goals. I also try to understand where technology is heading so we don't make a decision today that limits our options tomorrow as new capabilities like AI push us to think differently about how we build products.

Q David

How is the availability of these AI tools fundamentally changing the way people, companies and learning leaders work and think about their teams?

A Zach

When ChatGPT first hit the scene in late 2022, it was impressive but it layered neatly on top of existing workflows. You had to copy your work into a separate window, get an answer and paste it back out. You were locked into that loop.

Now, with agentic AI systems that run natively and can act independently, the biggest gains come not from treating AI as a bolt-on but from rethinking what our jobs actually are. I ask what brings me joy and what tasks make me feel like just a cog. Those cog-like tasks can be automated or restructured. That asks more of us as leaders, but that's where the real opportunity is right now.

Rethinking Jobs

Real gains come from questioning what a role should be, not just adding AI on top of it.

**AI as an
Always-On
Expert****Q David**

Where do you see the big opportunities ahead?

A Zach

Traditionally, a product manager would describe what should be built, designers would turn that into mock-ups and engineers would turn those mock-ups into working code. With generative AI, there's a softening of those job boundaries because AI acts as an 80 percent expert that's always available. A designer doesn't need the world's best programmer on hand for everything. They need someone competent most of the time, so instead of handing a design to an engineer, they can ask AI to build it and bring in an expert for the harder parts.

That kind of democratization of expertise is playing out across a lot of domains. In learning and development, we have subject matter experts who know deeply what should be taught but aren't always great course designers, which has limited what we're able to produce. Generative AI can empower those subject matter experts directly so we get better content faster, which frees learning professionals to focus on how to deploy that content and measure its effectiveness.

**Empowering
the Experts
You Already
Have**

Generative AI helps subject matter experts produce faster, while instant answers make judgment and taste the real differentiator.

AI is also changing access to information. Previously, if you had a problem, you'd search for it, click through several results and try to find something that roughly applied. Generative AI makes that process interactive and real time, which changes how we deliver learning and forces us to reconsider what people actually need to learn. If looking up how to build a VLOOKUP in Excel becomes instant, the question becomes how important it is to have that hard skill versus simply being able to describe what you want. Judgment and taste become increasingly important as a result.

Give AI the Context to Judge Like You Would

Models trained on the whole internet default to average. Context is what makes them useful.

Q David

What needs to be in place for organizations to let go of the wheel with confidence?

A Zach

Just as judgment, taste and context matter for a human decision maker, we need a similar framework for the technology. A large language model trained on the entire internet regresses to the mean. If you're below the mean, that feels like a boost. If you're already an expert, the average result is frustrating.

Most businesses don't want to be average institutions delivering average results, so we have to figure out what makes us distinct and give that context to the model. Successful AI deployments start by giving the model the context it needs to make the calls a human would make and reflect an organization's culture.

Q David

That reliance on data might be the biggest issue. Most organizations weren't in a great place with their data before this wave of AI arrived, separate from interoperability questions like whether two systems even define the same term the same way.

Learning technologies like xAPI let us track more than a grade or completion but raised the question of whether that data was consistent and well understood. Then AI arrives promising to make sense of all of it. Do companies genuinely understand the urgency around their data, or do they assume the tool will solve that for them?

Data Debt Predates the AI Wave

No Data Foundation

A Zach

I've seen people treat AI like a magic glitter bomb they can throw into the room, but that isn't the case. There's a lot of foundational work still required. AI can help map data from one format to another, but it won't do the work for us.

There's a study on AI's impact in Turkish secondary math education that illustrates this well. Researchers split students into three groups: a control group, a group given unrestricted ChatGPT access and a group given AI provided context about what good tutoring looks like. The unrestricted group outperformed the control group on homework but scored well below it on the final assessment. The contextualized group performed on par with the control group.

That shows dumping AI onto a process without a data foundation doesn't guarantee improvement and can make things worse, since you end up spending more on tokens to do the same things. With the right data foundation and clear goals, AI has real potential to make things better.

Transparency In, Transparency Out

Being clear about what data trained the model and that a human owns the output builds trust.

Q David

What should companies be thinking about when it comes to that human role in oversight and governance?

A Zach

These models are still largely black boxes. Information goes in, an output comes out and even the people who build them can't always explain why. That's unsettling, so the way to counter it is transparency on both ends: be clear about what data went into the model,

Trust the provider

and be clear the output came from AI. As a human, own that output, edit it and stand behind it.

The second piece is trusting the tool's provider. These models require enormous amounts of training data, and vendors often have an incentive to use customer data in that corpus, which may not be acceptable for personal or proprietary information. Organizations need enterprise agreements that clearly define how data can be used and confirm it won't be used for training. That's a strong argument for having an actual AI policy.

Q David

How should organizations think about building capability and experience if AI is handling work that used to serve as training ground?

A Zach

Protect Space for Productive Struggle

People learn by stretching and failing. Leaders have to make room for that, even with AI in the mix.

If there was already a problem, AI can make it much larger. I want a future where we're still investing in junior employees, finding ways for them to succeed and develop, even as what we ask of them has to change.

There's a concept in learning called productive struggle. Human brains don't come with software updates, so we learn best when we struggle a bit, try to recall something forgotten or attempt something and fail. AI is changing what junior employees work on and how roles are defined, but it isn't changing the value of that struggle. We have to preserve space for people to stretch and fail, which means leaders are accountable for regular feedback so people can course-correct.

Ground AI in What the Business Needs

Q David

Once a company gets past the basic decision to engage with AI, what should a chief learning officer or CHRO focus on first and what should they avoid?

A Zach

That's the right framing, because AI is a tool that appears to have staying power, so organizations have to reckon with it but nobody deserves credit just for deploying it. That attitude leads to spending a lot on tokens without delivering outcomes. Everything has to be grounded in what the department or organization is actually trying to accomplish, aligned to the biggest challenges the business is facing, the same way HR has long had to align itself to business outcomes rather than asking for money for a side project.

Once you have a clear sense of those priorities, ask people what part of their day they hate the most, since there's a lot of opportunity to automate or simplify that kind of work. The more exciting question is asking what they would do if they had twice as much time in the day, twice the size of their team or unlimited budget. AI tokens are expensive but they're still cheaper than doubling a team and they open the door to some of those bigger ideas, the transformative, motivating projects that really engage people and drive change, alongside the more basic work of eliminating the boring stuff.

Start With What People Hate Doing

Automating the worst parts of the day opens budget for bigger, more transformative work.

Q David

Is there a metric or a couple of metrics, you'd prefer to see?

A Zach

As much as I'd like people to move past simple adoption metrics, I don't think we're getting away from them and they're a reasonable

Track What You're Actually Trying to Drive

place to start. But the better metric is looking at what you're actually trying to drive. In engineering, that meant I wanted people using AI but more importantly, I wanted to see an uptick in code shipped without an increase in bugs. In learning, we have a lot of options, though many are lagging indicators.

If I build an enablement program tied to a sales target, I only know it worked once people hit their numbers at the end of the quarter. But you can look at how people engage with content along the way. If a large language model is connected to your course content and using it to ground its answers, you can track how often the model retrieves an answer from that content and delivers it to a person, right when they need it.

There are latent metrics in how the model works and where it's pulling content from that can offer real insight into whether a learning strategy is making a difference.

Q David

Closing the Statistics Gap

AI helps people teams surface honest, compelling patterns in data they already have.

Do you think AI's real advantage is surfacing patterns in messy data that learning leaders have always struggled to spot on their own, giving them better footing to claim a share of impact instead of assuming it can't be proven?

A Zach

For learning and people-team practitioners, AI can take the data already available and make sense of it in a compelling, honest way, beyond what the team may already know how to surface. There aren't many statisticians working on people teams. AI helps close that gap and gives teams the confidence to make that case.



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To provide CHROs, CLOs, and workforce leaders with the intelligence, tools, and community they need to drive business transformation through human capital excellence.

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