EDUCATION FUTURES PODCAST 14

Rob Reynolds:

So welcome everybody. This is Rob Reynolds. I'm the executive director at TEL Education. I'm joined today by Nick Hathaway, the CEO of ELocker. And welcome Nick and thanks for coming on and coming on board today and taking the time to chat with me.

Nick Hathaway:

Thank you, Rob. I'm really excited to have the opportunity.

Rob Reynolds:

Well, it's great to have you here and I know we're going to talk a lot about ELocker, about data and how we can use that to make sure we're providing equitable access to employment for all kinds of people, students, adults, et cetera, how we can do so many things with better transcripts, with better comprehensive records for learning that students actually own and that people keep with them for their whole lives.

Rob Reynolds:

But I want to start in the middle of COVID-19 from a higher education perspective, because people may not know you were formally Vice President of Administration and Vice President of Strategic Development at the University of Oklahoma, a large, comprehensive research institution here in Oklahoma. And so one of the things that I think is fascinating about this, that people probably think about but they're not even sure how to articulate it, is that it's a really complex thing when you decide we're going to shut down a university, especially one the size of the University of Oklahoma. Because we're not talking about just students moving remote and faculty providing Zoom sessions. We're talking about, I think, as you would say, probably it's a city, right? And you've got to shut the whole thing down.

Nick Hathaway:

Yeah. There's no doubt about that. I mean, when you think about a university, particularly one like the University of Oklahoma, it's a small city. And so yes, there's no way to underestimate the magnitude of the disruption brought by this pandemic. Certainly it impacts the teaching and learning as we see, changing the modalities of that moving online. But then again, one of the most beautiful aspects of the education at the University of Oklahoma is the residential experience, being in a diverse community of learners. And when you think about the impact there and arranging that learning environment for that learning that's going to continue in an exciting land of the future, you got all kinds of challenges. Certainly, I assume spacing in the classes, the way that the desks are arranged now, providing for an appropriate social distance to the way that the classrooms are cleaned. I have no doubt that they're thinking about, "Okay, what are the best practices for cleaning the classrooms and making sure that they're as absolutely sanitary as they can be from a COVID-19 perspective from day to day."

Nick Hathaway:

But it just goes on from there. All kinds of things. Every single aspect of the way that you operate would probably need to be scrutinized in order to account for the impact of the virus. I feel for those that are dealing with that. Like I said, I don't think that the magnitude change or the disruption can possibly be underestimated. It's an enormous challenge.

Rob Reynolds:

I appreciate that perspective Nick. And also I think you would agree our large research universities like OU play such an important role at the local, the state and even national levels. Their willingness to try to innovate and open up and come back on campus and mitigate risks, doing all the things they have to do, is really an important part of the stimulus to get us moving forward, continuing to innovate and and really get back on our feet.

Nick Hathaway:

Yeah, no doubt. I think really I'm excited by the announcements being made by universities across the country that they're going to do their best to be up and running in the fall because a lot of the time the impact of a research university or other universities is somewhat... It's hard. It's more imperceptible to a lot of people. I mean, how many people know that there are 10 technologies that were developed at universities that basically are a part of what made the iPhone a success? These universities every day are having that kind of impact on our lives, but it's somewhat imperceptible unless you stop the focus on it. A lot of people don't know it.

Nick Hathaway:

But this is going to be a real exciting opportunity, I think, for universities to explore the future. And I'm going to go ahead and say it's an exciting future even in dealing with this virus. I think we need to keep a positive mindset and I think that mindset and all of the opportunities that are going to be in the world ahead of us are those which universities will really do the best job of exploring. This idea of thinking about the past, studying the best ideas of the past, but then also very much turning to the future is the role of the university. And I think there's an exciting future waiting for all of us, even in this world with COVID-19 and I'm excited to see what these dynamic, diverse communities can do with it. I think they're the ones that are likely to find those solutions to the future. And I think it's great that they're going to get back up and running. We need them now more than ever.

Rob Reynolds:

I totally agree Nick. So now Nick, I want to talk about ELocker, your position there, what led you to get into what ELocker is and what your vision is and so if you can talk about that journey some and what you learned to get you to this point, and what you're thinking about moving forward, that would be really great.

Nick Hathaway:

Absolutely. Well one of the roles I really enjoyed at the University of Oklahoma was Chair of the Retention and Graduation Ready Task Force and that it really focused us on the opportunity to

really advantage students and to help them graduate from the University of Oklahoma, to really focus on student success. And some of the most impactful projects that we implemented there had the central theme of student data. It really convinced me of the power of student data.

Nick Hathaway:

There are so many things that we focus on in our life about the use of our data, whether it's our web browsing history or whether Alexa is listening. But when you think about it, there's a very valuable set of data in our lives, our educational records, that we don't focus on as much and I think we really should. Because when you think about your education records, they're extremely valuable to advantaging and advancing in education and a career. These are very central to your identity and there's a lot of exciting online tools, a lot of people doing some innovative things out there in the education space that will allow people to use your information to direct educational resources to your child or to help you identify an academic program that's right for you according to your skills development. And ultimately to help you connect with a job that really connects well with the skills that are reflected in your academic record.

Nick Hathaway:

So I think there's a lot of opportunities. One of the analogies that I draw that I think really helps convince people; when we go to the doctor, we all would love for our healthcare to be provided according to our medical records. You really want your doctor to see your records and know your history and know that you've had this or that ailment and may be allergic to this or that medicine. Well your education records really give a lot of detail as to who you are as a learner and what a wonderful thing to be able to provide that, to have control over that, to give that to the person who is serving you and advancing your education and your career. I think it's a really powerful tool. Your education records are something that could really, really advantage you and your life and ELocker is really focused on helping learners, helping families have more control over that really, really important data.

Rob Reynolds:

So when we think about it traditionally, if I'm a high school student for example, or an elementary school student, I'm going through the school system. I go through high school, I'm going to graduate with a diploma and I have a transcript or record of the courses that I took and the grades that I made. And I'm going to do the same thing when I go to college and I'll have a list of the courses that I took, maybe even the professor that I took them with, et cetera. But from experience, when I look at those records, let's say they're a PDF or even a printed version, it's really just a bunch of lines of, "I took this course." And one of the frustrating that I've always had as an employer is that doesn't tell me a whole lot and there are no additional dimensions to it. And to your point, the user doesn't have a lot of control over that.

Rob Reynolds:

So how do you think, as you look at just student records in general and having families and students own those, how would you see us being able to improve that, so that when I, as an

employer, look at the work of a student I actually have a much better idea of what they're really capable of doing?

Nick Hathaway:

Absolutely. I think you touched on a number of things that are really important. One you mentioned that a lot of the time education data these days is provided in PDFs. It's very flat information that is not able to be applied to modern tools that can advantage people. When it's in a PDF, you can't use some of the most exciting things that are out there that can help you in an online space use that information to your advantage. Also, you mentioned the connection with employment. I think a lot of the time a transcript simply has a course listed and a grade. Whereas really a transcript or a rich online comprehensive learner record, a lot like ELocker, would have much more insight into the skills development of a learner, might have badges.

Nick Hathaway:

One of the things that I really enjoy about TEL Library is the mastery framework to really give employers more insight into exactly what was learned. And when you think about a traditional transcript, it's hard to ascertain exactly what was learned by the learner. You don't get great insights into the skills development. Whereas if you layer things in there, like the mastery framework or like pathways for learning, it can help assure an employer that not only did they learn the content of the classes that are listed in the transcripts, but also perhaps there were other skills like leadership and other things like that, that are part of this person's skill set.

Rob Reynolds:

Yeah. And I know you're focused on that here in the state, at the University of Central Oklahoma, we have Jeff King and STLR, their student transformative learning record project. And one of the things that I know from working with you and Jeff is the importance of the student owning that and the student being able to record things beyond their courses. Because students have a lot to offer they don't necessarily know it's valuable or how to share it. And so I think that's such an important thing because that's what employers are looking for.

Rob Reynolds:

One question I have for you as a followup is, do you think this kind of flatness of the traditional transcript, the traditional diploma, the record that we get from a school, has served to accelerate, perhaps, the interest in some certificate programs where there's a really high degree of focus on skills and being able to perform certain tasks and it's so concrete that an employer looking at that says, "Yes, you've got this certificate, you can do this job."?

Nick Hathaway:

Yeah. I don't think there's any doubt that it has magnified the interest in those programs. Things like micro credentials or certificates, things that are an identifiable basket of skills development that an employer understands. They know what's in there. Perhaps it was developed collaboratively with them and there's no doubt. I think the lack of insight that's provided in a

traditional transcript has left an exciting opportunity out there for smaller credentials, micro-credentials that do a much better job of connecting and communicating and what exactly are the skills that were attained during that academic experience.

Nick Hathaway:

And the other thing that is enabled by a more comprehensive learner record, as you said, the STLR is an excellent example, there's a mountain of academic research out there to suggest that reflection is really an essential part of learning, to not only partake it of an academic experience, but then to reflect on its meaning to you and a richer comprehensive learner record, that which is sort of put forward by ELocker and in partnership with STLR really has a strong component of that. It invites the learner to reflect on the experience and thereby building a really truly exciting and rich set of data that includes transcript data, but it also includes achievements like these pathways, like these mastery frameworks and other accomplishments that then build to an academic record, a set of records that when you think about controlling them in a more meaningful way, it really allows families and students to advantage their academics and their career exploration in a really exciting way.

Rob Reynolds:

Yeah, absolutely. But one of the things that excites me so much about ELocker, when I think about it, I'm going to let you explain this, I kind of view a ELocker... It's not the only thing it does is the last mile, but I do see it as that last mile. Because what we've always been able to do, it seems like, we can provide an education and kids get an education, they go out and they know some stuff, but honestly, except for the students who are a little more aggressive, proactive, et cetera, we've never been really great at connecting students across the board with job opportunities and in particular helping them from very early on understand how their interests and the work that they're doing could be connected to different employment opportunities. And I think that's one of the most fundamentally exciting things about a platform like ELocker. I'm going to turn it back over to you and if you can talk about that and why it's important, but also how ELocker does that?

Nick Hathaway:

I think that's an extremely exciting opportunity to make a better connection between education and employment. And when you think about the strongest, most powerful, effective way to do that, it starts with a rich set of educational records and control of those records by the learner. When you think about, "Okay, what are the current tools that people use to explore job opportunities?" Typically they're online offerings that start by asking you a very limited set of questions. They don't want to ask you too many questions because if they ask you too many questions you're not going to fill it out and you're not [inaudible 00:16:01] service. But then also that limited set of data then reduces the effectiveness of the service that they're providing because they don't truly have a great insight into who you are, what are your skills. And when you think about the learner being in control of their records and curating them, keeping them longitudinally, K-20 over time, and then using that as their connection, as their voice in the job world, exploring what are the right opportunities for them, it's extremely exciting.

Nick Hathaway:

And the other thing that ELocker does, that I think is a real innovation and improves the efficiency in the talent marketplace, is that at the time, and this is working with nearly 2 million learners in the UK right now, so it's a proven service, one that we're excited to be launching here in the United States soon, but at the time that you're interested in exploring additional education and/or a job, you can choose to make a set of your records, an embodiment of who you are as seen through your records, available to a talent marketplace where then employers can see the talent that you have and then apply their opportunity by communicating with you to you.

Nick Hathaway:

So instead of the learner and the person being responsible for imagining how their unique talents can apply to a really complex world, it basically allows the world to see more into who that a person is as an individual and communicate with them according to the opportunities that they have. They know their opportunities well, they know the skillset that is required in order to succeed in that opportunity. ELocker allows that world of opportunity to communicate with people according to their unique skills. And I think that's a really exciting advancement when you think about things like equity and other things, other sorts of factors can wash away in that kind of environment. Whereas, typically someone might be beholden only to that advice that they would receive by the people that are in their life who may only have a limited perspective as to the opportunities in the world. It's really an exciting thing when you think about opening that up and really allowing the world to see people for their talents and invite them to partake of opportunities according to their talents on the broadest, most dynamic scale.

Rob Reynolds:

No, that's awesome. And if you think about it, the whole concept of employment has become such a reactive mess, and that's the best word I can come up with for it. Because what happens as an employer is I post a job opening on Indeed.com, some other place, I get 500 resumes and I'm in reactive mode, right? I'm just sorting through, sifting, the HR person is, I'm looking at this, trying to pick out some pattern as a human being. "Oh, look at that." Trying to pick a few people and do that. It's not good for me and it's certainly not good for the people applying.

Rob Reynolds:

What ELocker's doing is flipping it to a proactive solution using data, so as the student or as the adult, the learner, my data's available and it's always being updated and an employee over here can be looking at the data, not just specific individuals, I know what I need and then the system can give it to me much more accurately. And then when I do go out and start talking to people, I already know that I want to talk to them. I already know that they really fit, not just the tangible, but some of the intangibles I'm looking for, that makes life so much more efficient for me as an employer.

Nick Hathaway:

Yeah, there's no doubt and there's a lot of talk, obviously, because there needs to be more communication between the employment world and the education world. These two things need to work in close coordination. But when you think about it, what could be that which would tie them together? I think that which ties them together it a much more learner centric controlled aspect to the records themselves. Because let's just say someone's continuing through their education and they avail themselves of an exciting opportunity to get a micro credential from who knows where, maybe it's an organization, maybe it's a community organization, maybe it's a another academic enterprise, but the fact that they can then share that, at their discretion, in order to explore opportunities, it'll really improve communication because employers then might grow familiar with that [inaudible 00:20:41]. "Oh, this is someone who gained that credential. And I know from my experience with people who have gained that credential, this is what I'm going to get."

Nick Hathaway:

Gets back to your point before that all these exciting new developments on micro credentials and other certifications, I think that part of the exciting part of that is there's a great chance that employers will know more what's in there, and when you think about it then, combining it with a strategy and a technology service like ELocker that a learner could make the people with the opportunities aware that the learner has acquired that credential and the employer then knows what that credential means, it really will improve the synergy between that academic accomplishment and finding the opportunities that connect best with it.

Rob Reynolds:

No, absolutely. Now I want to jump in there, we can do this at Oklahoma level or writ large across the US, obviously because of COVID-19 we've had an incredible spike in unemployment, people not just who are furloughed, but truly unemployed and looking. And this is a crisis all its own. Not to mention we have all the people coming through that they're just now graduating, they're looking for jobs. So we have this very strange job market, it's a little bit unprecedented, in which employers seemingly have their pick in all these people out there, there are so many it makes it hard. I'm wondering, I know you've looked a lot at Oklahoma, you work with people at different levels in Oklahoma, how do you see, not just eat ELocker, but other groups getting together in our states and really trying to address this issue? How do we get people back to work efficiently? How do we get the right employers involved in the state? What are some of our solutions moving forward do you think?

Nick Hathaway:

Well, I think this is one of the most glaring examples of the opportunity to really see COVID-19 as an opportunity. It is a grand disruption, right? One of which we never wanted and have no control over, but it nonetheless has happened. But in a way it focuses us all on a very important dynamic that had been happening but just on a smaller scale. I think disruptions in the workforce were already happening in a fairly profound kind of way through technological innovation, various industries, with jobs being impacted by automation for this and that. And that was something that, certainly, as you look forward and look at the workforce in Oklahoma and

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workforce in any state going forward, there is a definite promise of ongoing innovation and disruption that's going to be impacting people's lives in a way that is historically unprecedented.

Nick Hathaway:

And so here we have a disruption brought by COVID-19 that is truly historic and unprecedented, it's massive. But it also draws our attention to finding a solution to something that's going to help us in any number of other ways, as I just described, going forward. So I think one of the real opportunities that comes from this is to heighten the focus on... I think a lot of the time what I've discovered, one of the things that keeps us from innovating is that a lot of the time people will have pride in their work. They like what they did yesterday, they feel like the eight to 10 hours that they spent working the day before was in the right focus and in the right vein and that they were successful. But that effectively also keeps people from thinking about what could be done different.

Nick Hathaway:

And here is a situation where no one has a choice but to look at doing things different and so I think it's a grand opportunity for innovation. Innovation that I hope focuses more on education records. I hope that we can take a more savvy approach to that as exemplified by ELocker. But also you've touched on other things like micro-credentials, certifications, academic achievements and attainments, badges that are developed in close communication and cooperation with the employment world, such that when people's jobs are disrupted or as their jobs are disrupted right now by the pandemic, if in a world in which those exist, it's a much clearer pathway. People can think, "Oh, I can get that micro-credential, I can get that certification and I can apply it to that job opening in the Oklahoma City area. Here's how much it'll cost me to get that certification. Here's how long it'll take me and here's the job in the Oklahoma City area that I can apply it to." You get a lot more focus on that.

Nick Hathaway:

And I think something else that I hope that this current crisis will focus us on is innovation relative to, I really think there's a convergence going on between K-12 and higher education. More and more you see students completing college work in high school. And when you think about it, this is a grand win, win, win all the way across the board, not only for the workforce because you're getting people who are challenging themselves and developing their skills in high school unlike they ever had before, but also that's a really successful strategy to lower the cost of higher education. So I think in all of those ways, I think this is really, again, it's something that we never wanted, but it's really a great opportunity that should focus us on some exciting innovations that are there for us to apply and make education even more powerful and impactful than it's ever been before.

Rob Reynolds:

Absolutely. You mentioned earlier, Nick, equity and we were talking about one of the great things about data and services like a ELocker and really providing equity so that regardless of where a child's background, their former circumstances, gender, religion, et cetera, the data is

the data and it really helps promote a lot of underserved students if done right. And that's really important.

Rob Reynolds:

I know you have a daughter going to college. My kids are out, they have their professional lives, but you and I have to admit where our children have an advantage, we know the system, we know all of these networks, we have our own networks, we know higher education, how to guide them, et cetera. But that's not the rule for everybody. And so many kids come along and they don't have equitable access to the same advantages that others do. And that's one of the things I think that excites me most was you talk about this great explosion, this innovation, this ability to get people employed, to find the right employers, and help employers find the right people and all of us to grow together. I guess one of the things that excites me most is it's really for everybody.

Nick Hathaway:

Yeah, no doubt. When you think about it and thinking about the workforce situation in Oklahoma City, let's just use that as an example there's talent in every single corner of Oklahoma City, and getting to the connection with the workforce, there are employers in Oklahoma City who shout quite loudly that they cannot find the talent that they need to fuel their business. If you look at the major employers, certainly Tinker Air Force Base, thinking about people with aerospace kinds of skills, they shout loudly. Paycom had a struggle finding the talent that they needed and building a campus in [inaudible 00:28:15] Texas.

Nick Hathaway:

But when you think about it, we haven't been implementing the strategies that we need to fully maximize the talent that exists in any given community because of the way that there's been a fairly siloed approach and not an openness relating to control of student records. If a student is in any school or any learning situation, perhaps they're homeschooled, in Oklahoma City area and in their ELocker it reveals that they have talents that would make them an excellent aerospace engineer, the exciting thing that's enabled by strategies like ELocker is that it allows, at the discretion of the learner and the family, it allows Tinker Air Force Base, whoever's looking for that aerospace engineer, maybe it's Boeing, to have the opportunity to communicate with that learner.

Nick Hathaway:

You're right, that learner may not have someone in their life that says to them, "You know what? You have the skills to be an aerospace engineer." They have no experience, it's no fault of their own, but they don't see those skill sets. They don't know that those skills amount to someone who would be an outstanding aerospace engineer. Those people are in every corner of Oklahoma City and the beautiful thing about a strategy like ELocker is it allows them to be discovered by the people who have the opportunities, the people who have the richest understanding of what it takes to be an aerospace engineer. And so I just think it's super exciting. It's something that I think when we put these strategies into action, I think what we'll

see is that rather than going through the expensive recruiting someone from other parts of the country or building campuses in other states, I think that using these strategies we can find that there's an immense amount of talent in Oklahoma City and other cities that hasn't been tapped.

Rob Reynolds:

No, absolutely agree and this is just so exciting. It really fires me up. We're running out of time here. Nick, I really want to thank you for just what you're doing, your commitment to education, to employment here in Oklahoma. Again, I know how active you are at many different levels in trying to work on comprehensive solutions to help our infrastructure, help our businesses and help our students come together to continue moving us forward as a state and as a nation. So thank you so much for everything you're doing.

Nick Hathaway:

Well, thanks for the opportunity, Rob. And really I've got a great appreciation for what you're doing with the TEL, your experiential learning framework, your attention to equity and affordability, I think is extremely important. And innovators in the education spaces you can tell us something that I appreciate greatly and I think it's super exciting, making a very positive and impactful impact on the world.