



Smarter Ways to Build Your Professional Network

Episode #21

with Joanne Bentley and Graham Edmondson

[00:00:00] **Joanne Bentley:** Hello, and welcome to the Leaders in Learning Design podcast by Blue Consulting and Resourcing the place to get up to the minute information for cutting edge learning design. So listeners, Graham and I are here today with Ardell Thornton. She's a professional trainer, a successful facilitator, and an experienced networker for the past seven or eight years.

Ardell, why don't you tell us a little bit more about yourself? How did you get started?

[00:00:39] **Ardell Thornton:** Sure. And first of all, thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited to discuss networking this morning. I have been a professional trainer for, this spring, will mark eight years. And I am based in Chicago and have really enjoyed over the course of that last eight years just an array of training projects as a contract trainer involving various types of technical training, customer service training, as well as new hire training. So just been a real joy. I enjoy the variety of the projects.

[00:01:15] **Graham Edmondson:** But you're an independent, aren't you? You technically work on your own, so to speak.

[00:01:21] **Ardell Thornton:** I absolutely do. I am an independent contractor. And that has just come out of, I kind of spent a year of kind of soul searching there in 2012 after leaving nine years as a pharmaceutical sales representative in the Chicago land area. And just really just took a moment there in 2012 to really take a look at, of all the roles that I had had.

What did I enjoy in each of those roles and really picking those things out. And from there, I really discovered that my passion was training delivery. And so, beginning in the spring of 2014 I became an independent contractor. And so really working for myself in that space and just partnering with various consulting firms as an independent contractor in specifically with the realm of training delivery.

[00:02:14] **Graham Edmondson:** Now Ardell, the one thing we know about you to be honest is that you are extremely good at networking. I say that because,

we've talked to people over the last several months, who many of whom obviously knew you complimented you on saying that you had worked really hard to create a network. So presumably you really think a network is an important part of being an independent.

Is that fair to say?

[00:02:46] **Ardell Thornton:** It is absolutely very important and very critical; I believe to Individual success. And just two seconds of background. In my belief of that, I started out probably as all of us with, you know, our first kind of responsibilities, true enough, being at home and the responsibilities that our parents would put on us.

And from the standpoint of developing a work ethic. But outside of that, my real work ethic was built from the time I was 13 years old. My first job was working for my parents. And when I say working for my parents, that was at the two McDonald's that they owned. And that was where my real work ethic got built.

And one of the things that was key there that I'll never forget was, the founder of McDonald's, Ray Kroc. One of his quotes that has stayed with me is, "none of us is as good as all of us." That is something that is truly stayed with me all of this time. And so, when we're talking about networking, because I could be wrong, but I don't remember the word networking in the seventies.

I don't think we were really using that word in the net. We were doing. But we didn't have a real word for it. I could be wrong, but I don't remember that word then. But that quote is something and it's not just a quote, it's a mindset. And so, I want to start there in mentioning, having that mindset means that it's never just about me.

I'm limiting myself if I'm only as good as my ideas, my thinking, my experience and who I know. Right? So, with that, it's the belief then, that our expanse and our reach is so much greater when we're connected to so many others who are doing what we're doing. And so, from that, we're talking about then the sharing of the expertise, of the understanding, of the contacts and that reach is just so much greater when we are engaging in that shared of what we know and who we know. I just firmly believe that. And so, I so regularly, almost on a daily basis engage in it. For example, when I find a project and because my passion is strictly training delivery, I tend to have to work a little harder to find

projects. Because I do not design or create content. My passion is strictly delivery and me having to work harder. It's such a win for me when I find the kind of work that I do.

And so, I get so excited. I immediately reach out to great trainers that I know. And so that sharing comes into place because I'm running. Look what I got. Look, look, look what we got, right. Not just me. Look what we got. Because the other part of that is I love to work with great trainers, right? So, it's just a, there's an array of benefits that come out of it.

We're learning from each other; we're sharing that connection. So just so many benefits that come there. The other thing that I like is something that we're then often able to do is a win-win situation that gets created from the standpoint of when I can say to a recruiter, you need five more, really good trainers.

I got them. Can I introduce you to them? So that's a win for that recruiter. And that's a win for those great trainers who are looking for a great project.

[00:06:53] **Graham Edmondson:** I've got to tell you Ardell that that is exactly of course what happens when BCR were reaching out to resource a project. You through whatever means entered onto our radar.

And then low and behold, within a few days, people are popping up saying, "Hey, I hear from our Ardell Thornton that you got an opportunity." It was quite startling. And I didn't know until we talked just now, I didn't know that that was your practice to, to share the good news with great trainers. And I've got to say we benefited hugely from that. But that was a real good example of a network working.

Yeah. Fantastic.

[00:07:35] **Ardell Thornton:** Absolutely. Absolutely. I, because I guess too, I believe absolutely that good people tend to know good people. Right. And so, I just think that that is just again an array of benefits that come out of that. I, the learning that takes place. I was in a position where I was going to have a very short five-week project and there was software that was going to be involved, that I really don't have much experience with. And I was able to reach out to a long-time trainer who set off. I've literally trained on that software. Let's just,

we'll just schedule some time and I'll just teach you whatever you need to know. And so that's huge.

Right? And it's not a big deal for that person who was going to help me. They literally done training in it, but it was priceless for me. And so that's the learning that takes place. When we talk about increasing our skills. And we know when we're increasing our skills, we're increasing our marketability.

[00:08:42] **Graham Edmondson:** And what I love about the way you describe it is it's really bringing your value. You talk there about, you know, you're able to. I guess get advantage from what somebody else knew because within your network, they were prepared to share that on you in turn, you shared a work opportunity. This is a whole lot more than just making a connection on LinkedIn and kind of following somebody's blogs.

This is active networking that you're talking about here.

[00:09:14] **Ardell Thornton:** Absolutely.

[00:09:16] **Joanne Bentley:** So that brings up a really good point. What are the activities that you do to build your network? What recommendations would you have for other folks who are just starting in this area?

They tend to get fixated on following people on social media. What else could they do?

[00:09:34] **Ardell Thornton:** The very first thing that I did was. My local it's called we're calling it ATD now. But at that time, it was ASTD. The first thing that I did to kind of sit down and just brainstorming, how am I going to get into this field? I've identified it as my passion now, how do I get into it?

And so one of the very first things that I did was attend a meeting of my local ATD chapter. And introduce myself, and participating at some of those meetings. That was my first step in trying to get into the field and really begin to network with some stuff. Some folks who were in the field.

The second thing that I did was I reached out to my own friends to ask them, "do you have any friends who were in this line of work? Do you have any friends who are trainers, who are contract writers?" And that led me to, I had a friend who in fact had a friend who had been training for years. Can you please

introduce us? We met. And that person connected me with my first professional training contract right here in Chicago.

And so, that was the second means by which I worked to get into the field.

A third thing that I did was, I attended the 2013 ASTD national conference. That would be of course, in the company of thousands of people who were in my field and consulting firms. And then additionally I attended and what I believe, I think it was the 2014 Training Magazine conference.

That again, allowed me to meet recruiters and meet other trainers. So, industry conferences, your own network of friends. We never know who someone else knows. And so that way who do you know, who's a trainer. And as I said, my local chapter of the ASTD another opportunity could have been. I leaned towards the ASTD because of course that's specifically training, but we know as well.

There could've been some positive things that came out of attending, say a SHRM meeting. There that's another opportunity, but those industry organizations, even just as a start. But that was the means by which I began to make my way into the field and do some networking and connecting.

[00:12:03] **Graham Edmondson:** And that sounds really proactive Ardell.

It's much more than just clicking on somebody's name. It's a proactive step, a conscious thing that you do, which I think is, obviously paying dividends. So, in that sense, I mean, how would you think your network has benefited you or what has it given to you? I think you've hinted a few things, but if you could just summarize the real benefit that a network has brought for you as an independent?

[00:12:32] **Ardell Thornton:** Absolutely. It's ongoing. It does not end. It means the sharing of ideas. It means support, at different times from the standpoint of sometimes we don't get that opportunity that we want. So, we're always there to support each other and encourage each other.

It's the sharing of work opportunities. It's the sharing of contacts and sharing of expertise. There was a moment when, introducing myself on the BCR network where I threw out as a, as an example I have no experience in the scheduling software space and I'd love to be able to branch out into that area.

And so I threw that out as an example. Hey, is there anybody here in the network who has that experience? But no, it is a very active, it's behaviors, it's action. That's getting you there. We can get ideas from reading blogs and, that kind of thing. Absolutely we can, but I am more of an active participant.

It's putting those ideas to paper and brainstorming, and then you gotta go out there and pursue them.

[00:13:40] **Graham Edmondson:** That's what we're trying to really stress Ardell, that the, all the benefits that it brings, but it is quite a hard work process. It does demand efforts and it's an investment of time, but I think it pays dividends.

Doesn't it? It's, it's a valuable, hugely valuable exercise. We think for anybody who's stepping out on their own. I would go as far as to say, it's the thing that makes the difference very often as to whether somebody survives in the big wide world on their own or doesn't. The network is as powerful as that.

It can make the difference between surviving and failing in the outside world.

[00:14:23] **Ardell Thornton:** Absolutely. And I think to certainly mentioning that much of the hiring that takes place is through referrals. It's because you've worked on a project with other trainers. And I know for me, one of my goals is always to be able to walk away, so to speak, ideally with at least one to two trainers who I've really connected with, felt very good about, and want to take with me, so to speak from the standpoint of staying in touch with them and adding them to my network.

So, from there, It's just such an opportunity to that growing that then takes place. But, you know, again, it's a goal of mine that they're that their folks, and then the referrals, it just starts from there because when I get to another project, those people that I've worked with, and I've seen and experienced that they're good trainers.

They're good communicators. I want to bring them on because I want to work with good people. So, I'm going to immediately reach out to those folks.

[00:15:26] **Graham Edmondson:** That is such a powerful thing to hear. And anybody listening in who is at a stage in their career, whether that they maybe

haven't made that effort, that's an endorsement of just how worthwhile it is and the value that we get from the effort that we put into building a network.

I think what we're going to do in subsequent podcasts Joanne. And we'll talk a little bit more about the BCR Connect. In a way that we think, or an opportunity that I think we can provide for people with absolutely no cost associated, just the opportunity and more importantly, a place to do the kind of things that Ardell is talking about.

And the value.

[00:16:11] **Joanne Bentley:** I think that's a great idea, Graham, because going to an event or joining a network like BCR, there's real power in those small, repeated sharing and learning together because it builds relationships. And that's what a network's based on, because we've found that tough times don't last --tough contractors do, isn't that right Ardell?

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- BCR Connect – www.bcrconnect.net
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