

Work Shift Episode 12 Podcast

CHILD 1: When I grow up, I want to be a contractor because I like building stuff. When I grow up, I want to be a stunt double.

CHILD 2: When I grow up, I want to be an astronaut and travel to Mars.

[music]

RAY HARRIPAUL: It's just over four months after the World Health Organization declared the Coronavirus outbreak a pandemic, and physical distancing, masks, and remote working aren't going away any time soon.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: And, there's no doubt working people in a wide range of industries are waiting to see what the future holds as we move through the COVID-19 pandemic.

RAY HARRIPAUL: Yeah, everyone in the postsecondary education world is feeling the effects of the pandemic response, from employees to current students and people deciding whether now is the right time to dedicate money and energy to a college or university program.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: The COVID-19 pandemic created what appears to be the perfect storm for the sector, closed campuses, challenges for international applicants, lower enrollment and less revenue, and an economic recession. But, there are silver linings to some of those storm clouds.

RAY HARRIPAUL: On this episode, we're exploring how the coronavirus pandemic has and will continue to affect students and the world of postsecondary education. Welcome to another COVID-19 edition of Work Shift.

KEN STEELE: It's a very anxious year. No one knows quite what's going to happen, and in that sense, you know, pandemics aren't unprecedented, but this year from an enrollment management perspective, unprecedented unpredictability volatility in terms of what yield is actually going to be, who's actually going to enrol, how many courses are they actually going to take. Nobody really knows, and I think the answer's different at every institution.

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RAY HARRIPAUL: Digital disruption.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: The gig economy.

RAY HARRIPAUL: Artificial intelligence.

SYNTHESIZED VOICE: Robots!

RAY HARRIPAUL: And now, COVID-19. What does this all mean for you?

SHAWNE McKEOWN: I'm Shawne McKeown.

RAY HARRIPAUL: And, I'm Ray Harripaul.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: We're exploring the future of work and changes you can expect to see at your job.

RAY HARRIPAUL: We'll tell you how this massive digital shift to change your career and what you can do to adapt, evolve, and thrive.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: We're talking to Ken Steele, a well-known consultant who monitors trends and developments shaping the future of higher education.

RAY HARRIPAUL: He's the President and Chief Futurist at EduVation.

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SHAWNE McKEOWN: Colleges and universities have announced what their fall semesters will look like. They'll be largely online with on campus options for select students when available and when it's safe. We kicked off our conversation with Ken by asking him what has surprised him the most about the pandemic responses at schools in Canada and beyond.

KEN STEELE: You know, it's been an interesting process to watch and certainly my eye's been on announcements for the Fall term and how institutions are going to respond. Obviously, the Spring was surprising. It was remarkable to see how quickly a million students could get moved into online delivery and all of that. But, as we look at the Fall term, there's a real diversity. South of the border, 70% of colleges and universities are saying we are going to be on campus as normal this Fall.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: Wow.

KEN STEELE: The reality is they're deluding themselves, and I think they're trying very hard not to lose market share.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: Since we recorded this interview with Ken, new coronavirus cases spiked in parts of the U.S., and many colleges and universities have since walked back their on campus reopening plans.

KEN STEELE: Here in Canada, tuition stakes are lower. Students are a bit less anxious about the implications, but there's still plenty of anxiety. What's interesting is, as you say, there's some institutions like Redeemer University College in Hamilton, St. FX in Antigonish, Nova Scotia who have said we are going to be as close to normal on campus as possible. We're going to be first and foremost on campus, and we'll use online where we have to. There are a few institutions who have gone the other hard end and said we're going to be purely online. About 80% or 90% of Canadian institutions have all landed on the blended or hybrid position. So, it's striking that they have so many different ways of describing what's essentially the same thing. We're going to deliver large classes online, and we're going to try to bring as much onto campus as the public health authorities will allow us to do. And, it's striking just how different that is from the U.S., and I think as this pandemic evolves, I'm a pessimist. I believe it's going to be with us throughout 2021 and probably into 2022. We're going to see, you know, varying waves of this pandemic still. It's going to become very regionalized. So, an institution in the far north, an institution in an

isolated island in Atlantic Canada may be able to get away with normal on campus instruction while big centres like Toronto, Calgary, Vancouver in particular may need to stay locked down more often. So, we're going to have that sort of wave of lockdown [inaudible].

RAY HARRIPAUL: Waves of lockdowns. Yikes! Obviously, this will affect how programs are delivered, and it will also affect the bottom line. Schools across the country and the continent have seen decreased enrollment numbers, and the pandemic continues to affect the overall economy.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: So, how do colleges and universities handle this cash crunch, and what does that mean for students?

KEN STEELE: The fundamental question's going to be how government responds to this because, yeah, as you look at the cash crunch for higher ed, you know, yeah sure. There were some new expenses around sanitation, around barriers, around refunds of ancillary fees and so on from the Spring, emergency student bursaries. There's a bunch of expected. Some institutions ran out and bought 5000 laptops to loan to students for emergency use. I mean, lots of unexpected expenses, but in particular, it's the lost income, the loss of conferences and summer camps in the summer, the risk of significant enrollment declines this fall, international in particular where if our borders stay closed, stats would suggest anywhere from 20% to 60% of international students are not going to pursue their plans online. So, we could see a significant drop in funds for which institutions have become quite dependant. And then, there's the government piece. So, right now, the federal government is providing emergency supports to the entire economy, but not particularly to higher ed institutions. The reality is that we're, our institutions will need emergency supports to stay afloat if the worst case scenario happens around enrollment. And, governments are going to be tight. You know, however long this recession continues, their revenues from taxes will decline, their cost for medical care and healthcare are going to rise. It is going to be very tough for our provinces to do anything other than cut educational budget. So, over the next few years, we're going to see tighter and tighter finances for the sector. I don't think we can avoid that, and I mean that was the reality before, too. Now, it's just much more so. So, how's it going to affect the student experience? Gosh. I think we're going to see more and more use of data analytics, predictive algorithms, AI, online apps and tools to try to support students where we don't have the resources to put people in place. So, we're going to try to automate more things. In the short term, public institutions in Canada will be leaning on private providers for rapid adoption of new tech platforms of online learning and so on. In the longer run, I don't know that they'll be able to afford it. So, it'll be a political question.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: Here's Rick Huijbregts, Vice President Strategy and Innovation at George Brown College. We asked him how George Brown will be able to invest in new tech tools to broaden the scope of program delivery amid a recession and lower enrollment rates.

RICK HUIJBREGTS: We're working diligently and look at every dollar spent and directed solely to delivering a high and a great experience for our students in a very safe and healthy manner. That's the one and only thing that guides every decision we make, including

investment decisions. We are pausing and slowing down other investments for the benefit of moving dollars to providing the greatest technology into the classrooms, the greatest technology so that our faculty can teach remote and online, give them all the tools they need. But, also making the right technologies available for students that could not, that may not have access to some of those technologies. We've already distributed hundreds of laptops and technology to students. We're also looking for continued support. We've received some support from the government. We've reached out to our community and to our partners. They have contributed to the support for our students. We're going to lean heavily and collaborate closely with our partners because we know that these are unprecedented times, and only when we work together, both within the college as well as with our community around us will we get through this, and will we deliver an amazing experience, and ultimately come out of this better and stronger with more amazing tools that will continue to enhance what our students get when they come to George Brown.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: It's the question lots of students are asking. If most learning will happen online this fall, why aren't they getting a tuition decrease?

RICK HUIJBREGTS: It's a fair question and probably if my kids were in college, I would have questioned the same. Being, though, within the college system, I recognize that we are not online education institutions. So, the shift from analogue and in classroom and campus based to online is a costly one. We still have our facilities. We still have our staff. We still have our services. Now, they'll all need to be converted and transformed and were into online matters. So, by just flipping a switch and say now you can consume this online, we still have an infrastructure, if you will, that was designed for an on campus delivery. So, at this point, nobody, and us included, are really saving any money for delivering online. As a matter of fact, we're actually spending more on the technology, on the infrastructure, on training of our faculty so that they can deliver better remote experiences. And, I suspect that we'll last a while longer as we convert not only our institution but the whole system, if you will, into a much more agile hybrid online and digital learning infrastructure.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: Employers have been saying for years they really want graduates with strong soft skills like problem solving, communication, teamwork, work ethic. Some call them people skills. If we're delivering programs online, how can students develop these skills? Here's Ken Steele.

KEN STEELE: A lot of international students are coming to Canada specifically to develop linguistic skills, social skills, and to sort of get that full experience, and by moving as we have to an online delivery or to a primarily online delivery, there's no question we're losing some of that. I've talked to faculty members over the years who don't know how these kids today are going to function out in the workplace if they don't have etiquette and social skills and so on, if they're not comfortable talking face to face and if it all is, you know, texting into their phones and social media. At the moment, most people's employment hinges on them being able to function, texting into phones, social media, and participating in web calls. So, there's a way in which we can prepare them right now for the current reality using these tools, I think. But, there's no question we're losing a lot of that interactivity between students, between students and faculty, the random serendipitous conversations that can happen on a campus. There's a lot of serendipity that's lost and a lot

of the extracurricular is lost, and while institutions are trying to figure out ways to sort of artificially construct them, you can create discussion boards to stand in for student clubs. You can try to create coffee hours. Use 10,000 coffees and create kind of social matching. you can create cohorts and mentorship partners and ebuddies and things. You can try to create some social connection, but it ultimately is, it's always going to be scheduled. You know, nothing happens unless you plan it, and that's an artificiality that is not really sustainable.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: And, here's Rick Huijbregts.

RICK HUIJBREGTS: Yeah, I think certain things such as we talked about as human skills may have amplified. No matter where I think workers are going, there will be the requirement or the necessity to be more agile, to be able to work from home, to be able to work in remote teams, and in some professions, we may not have thought that to be that essential or that critical. And, I think the last three months have demonstrated to us that it is. So, I think maybe learning in a remote online manner actually will provide additional skills and additional experiences that will prepare us even better for what the future of work is going to look like.

RAY HARRIPAUL: George Brown will roll out a new program this fall. The Interprofessional Complex and Long Term Care Program is fully online. That was the intention when it was developed pre-COVID-19. Good timing. Rick says it could serve as a model for other programs.

RICK HUIJBREGTS: Not only focuses on essential set of skills and jobs that we really need in this difficult time, but it's also a program, the Interprofessional Complex Long-Term Care Program, it's also one that is designed to be online and that it's designed to incorporate online gaming and simulation, features and functionalities to offer a very rich experience to our students without necessarily having to come to campus. It's also a short program. It's only two semesters so that people in the profession can upgrade and upskill and get these necessary skills. And, I think that we're going to see a lot more of that in the time after markets kind of collapse or become smaller and we have more unemployment or people that need to now upgrade and upskill to remain relevant in a rapidly changing workforce. So, we will see more and more rolling out of online simulated remote programming. We also realize, though, that many of our programs require or depend on a hands-on component. So, we're actively working with our faculty and our staff to look at how to digitize and reimagine some of those hands-on components, and as soon as it's safely allowed and possible, we will be opening up our campus again, particularly to support students in those programs.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: As schools continue to develop online and hybrid pandemic programming, how do they win over new students? Here's Ken Steele.

KEN STEELE: Price sensitivity will be up because of the recession. The mobility will be down. Students will either stay put and study at the local option, hoping for some on campus, or they will go for top tier brands. I think much of what's happening right now in terms of recruitment is behind the scenes. So, there's a ton of energy going into what's called conversion, making sure that applicants actually do register this fall. So, one-on-one

conversations, video conferencing, orientation programming, onboarding, all sorts of energy is going on there. We're not seeing ad campaigns really from institutions right now. They're sort of broad mass media marketing and so on. International is going to be a massive hit no matter what we do. Estimates are 20% to 50% of international students are going to defer if they can't actually come here. It's a very anxious year. No one knows quite what's going to happen, and pandemics aren't unprecedented, but this year from an enrollment management perspective, unprecedented unpredictability volatility in terms of what yield is actually going to be, who's actually going to enrol, how many courses are they actually going to take. Nobody really knows, and I think the answer's different at every institution.

RAY HARRIPAUL: Here's Rick outlining why college is the way to go.

RICK HUIJBREGTS: Sure, we need more Ph.Ds. and Masters, but every time we need to rebuild the nation, we need people that do, people in the essential roles. Look at, frankly, all the roles that were tagged as essential in the last three months, many of them for which you come to college. I mean, this is the heart and the engine of our economy. So, I think college is the best choice. Second, although I can appreciate sending a child to college not knowing how often they'll be on campus and what the experience exactly that they're going to have, I actually think our youth is a lot more resilient to learn in an environment like this, and it's, I appreciate, by the way, this is not for everybody, and some people are struggling in this kind of online learning world. But, as we mentioned earlier around the new set of skills, I think this is the way of the future in whatever job or career we pursue. So, having to take a semester or two or part of your education in an online learning mode, personally, I don't think should stop or stall your education progress for your children.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: They say every cloud has a silver lining. Ken says the pandemic helps speed up a few positive long-term trends.

KEN STEELE: And, we've seen growing interest in the scholarship of teaching and learning, growing interest in pedagogy and looking at how we better improve learning outcomes at student success, at how do we monitor students, identify those at risk, proactively reach out with support, get them through. All of that stuff has been simmering for two decades. I think we're going to start realizing that lecture's a waste of time when we get people in a room together, that time together's going to be precious on campus, and we're going to start realizing we want to use this for really interactive, really active learning, really experiential, hands-on stuff and move lectures online. You know, that's been a trend that's been happening for some time, a realization that active learning has twice the learning outcomes of passive lecture. And, this accelerates that trend. Everyone's going to have a couple more arrows in their quiver when it comes to teaching now. So, in that sense, I think we're going to see big improvements in teaching and learning.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: And, here's Rick Huijbregts.

RICK HUIJBREGTS: It is good to see that the vision for 2030 we just created as an institution with the help of all of our employees and our partners, I believe still holds, and as a matter of fact, maybe COVID-19 has demonstrated that the things we painted for, the future we painted for us are maybe now more realistic and more needed and maybe more

urgent than ever before. So, I hope that we don't let, as they say, a good crisis go to waste, and actually learn from this experience and continue to push for the right balance between online, simulated, digital, and virtual and experiential learning. I think we have an opportunity, and again, I would want to argue we wanted to get there anyway, but now it just accelerated. To think about the marriage of technology and hands-on, in person learning to see how we can enrich the experience. And, the point you made earlier around the Interprofessional Complex Long Term Care program which is online. We're already seeing and we're already making investments in shorter, more essential, relevant online learning that will complement and augment the amazing kind of hands on and on campus experiences that we have come to deliver for the last 50 plus years. So, I like to think that maybe we do look different when things all become slowly normal again and that we are armed with a newfound energy and innovation to maybe more rapidly reimagine how to deliver quality education to the hands of students that may be all over the place, not necessarily on campus or in Toronto. But, that we look for different ways to scale the educational experience that we have been known for.

[music]

SHAWNE McKEOWN: It's time to take a look at the future want ads.

ALL: Yay!

RAY HARRIPAUL: Yes, kids. Listen up because these could be the jobs you'll be applying for when you grow up.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: In this segment, we ask our guests to outline a job that they think should exist in the future. Okay, Ken. What have you got for us?

KEN STEELE: The best answer I can come up with for a future job in higher education is something that's been called a Learning Engineer.

RAY HARRIPAUL: Cool. What will they do?

KEN STEELE: You could argue that those already exist in some ways. We have curriculum developers. We have Learning Technology Specialists and so on, but this idea of Learning Engineers who are trained in all of those areas, curriculum, authentic assessment, teaching and learning approaches, who would work with instructors and faculty, librarians, and maybe some software tools and AI tutors, whatever, to sort of optimize the learning experience.

SHAWNE McKEOWN: What kind of education or experience would be required for this job?

KEN STEELE: I think if you want a support person to work with faculty, especially at universities where there's a very rigid hierarchy, they probably need to have a masters or Ph.D. It doesn't matter a lot what it's in, but it's probably in education or in some kind of information technology. Harvard's Grad School of Education already has a Masters in Technology Innovation in Education, TIE, which is sort of where this terminology around learning engineers is starting to get discussed. So, my guess would be that kind of a

background would prepare people to come in and assist the subject matter experts who are the faculty with optimizing the courses, and particularly if we're trying to accommodate students with a whole range of accessibility needs and varying degrees of equity in terms of their backgrounds and their resources. We're going to need to put real conscious thought into designing courses and programs to create the best learning outcomes we can.

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SHAWNE McKEOWN: That's a wrap on this episode of Work Shift. What did you think?

RAY HARRIPAUL: Want to share your thoughts on this episode?

SHAWNE McKEOWN: Email us at workshift@georgebrown.ca. This podcast is brought to you by the fine folks at George Brown College. We want to thank Ken Steele and Rick Huijbregts for sharing their thoughts with us today.

RAY HARRIPAUL: It's the end of your Work Shift. Thanks for listening.

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