

Interview with Holly Owens, M.Ed

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SECTION 1: INTERVIEW

1.) What inspired you to move from a k-12 career into instructional design?

Working K-12 became challenging. I found myself spending a great deal of time on such things as paperwork and navigating politics within the school instead of educating. Along the way, I fell in love with Ed Tech and wanted to do more with that. I continued my education during evening and soon jumped into an e-learning position. After about six months, my boss in that position approached me and said that an instructional technology specialist position had opened at Northern Virginia Community college. He encouraged me to apply

A couple of days after applying, I was called in for an interview and quickly hired. So, I went from teaching K-12 to higher education. I was really what I was looking for in a career and I've worked with several higher education situations since then.

So basically, I moved from an interest in Ed tech and instructional technology into becoming an instructional designer and I help other people design online courses.

2.) Looking at your entry on LinkedIn, most of you most of your background seems to be in higher education. What inspired you to work for Amazon?

Instructional design in higher education focuses on things like learning management systems and educational technology tools. However, the corporate world has a greater focus on innovation and moving the field forward.

I wanted to challenge myself, so I began looking for something corporate. Plus, my background in teaching graduate-level instructional design courses allows me to have a foot in both worlds. Working at Amazon has given me the opportunity to compare the differences between instructional design principles used in the corporate world versus those in a higher education environment.

a. I have to ask, what's it like working there?

I've only worked there five months, so I'm still getting settled. But it's fun and challenging. Amazon is a huge company that places emphasis on innovation and pushing things forward. It's a fast-paced environment. I'm shocked at what I have learned and accomplished in the short amount of time that I have been there. I've already developed multiple e-learning projects.

3.) What are some of the differences you see between your university students versus those at Amazon (and that can include anything you want to talk about, motivation, enthusiasm, etc.)? In what ways have you adapted how you teach to meet address those differences?

It can be challenging to encourage innovation in higher education. Faculty, particularly those that are tenured, do not have to explore new ways of doing things and can be resistant to change. It can be difficult to even have that conversation with them. I feel like sometimes faculty have a lot of power because they have been the center of the university environment for so long.

However, in a corporation, like Amazon, the focus is more on the learner than the teacher. We are training people who are already actively employed with us. We are upscaling them or recertifying them. These are things that workers have to learn in order to be successful in their job. We want to do everything we can to get them what they need.

Plus, I think employees are more focused because they know that this is information that they need. Whereas a student might view the material being covered as more optional

We try to be very interactive in our projects. We want to engage the learners. You cannot rely on simply PowerPoint slides to be successful. Scenario-based learning is very popular at Amazon.

4.) I know the majority of individuals in the field come from an education background. Do you have any advice for someone interested in entering the field who does not come from an education background?

I tell people to identify what their skills are and market how those skills translate into whatever role they want. For example, lesson planning shares many similarities with project management. Both commonly use backwards design, both require knowing how much time you will need to plan for, etc. Creating an e-learning is like a project plan.

Plus, there is a common misconception that it is knowledge of the technology that makes your marketable, but that's not the case. Whether or not a person can fit into the culture is just as important. Every week, I hold fifteen-minute conversations with people seeking instructional technology career advice. I always tell them to start looking at job descriptions early on and find your niche. That is probably the best advice I can give.

5.) What inspired you to start a podcast?

I wanted to look at successful companies and individuals in the field and find out how they got to where they are. Talking to CEOs and founders is inspiring to me. I'm letting them share their stories knowledge and give other people the chance to learn from them. The podcast has allowed me to speak to people from all over the world. It's interesting to see how the field is expanding. It's been very fun.

Also, people don't have time to explore every instructional design tool that is available to them. The pod cast allows them to learn about new tools that are available that they might find useful. All they have to do is find the episode that deals with the tool they want to learn more about.

6.) Do you have any advice can you offer to someone like me, who is a walking bundle of Imposter Syndrome?

Impersonator syndrome is tough, and definitely something that must be conquered. Imposter syndrome ebbs and flows, especially for someone in a new role. I've been an instructional designer for fifteen years and it still happens to me, too, especially since starting at Amazon.

I would say to just take things day by day and be very patient with yourself. Also, do as much training as you can. I've blocked out 30 minutes on my calendar every morning for training. I pick what I want to learn, Storyboard for example, and focus solely on that training for 30 minutes each day. That helps with imposter syndrome because it gives you more of a background or foundation that you can use. So just take 30 minutes to upskill and personally develop. Never forget that everyone starts somewhere.

7.) I know that you are a big proponent of conference attendance and joining professional organizations. What are some of the organizations that you have found to be most valuable and that you would recommend?

I encourage people to find the discounts. If your institution has a membership, take advantage of it. Before investing money, use what opportunities you have to feel out the various organizations in order to find ones that appeal to you the most.

One of the most important things attending conferences or joining an organization is that presenting at a conference looks particularly good on a resume. Potential employees are often looking for people who have presented. Presenting has also allowed me to meet so many different people and travel to so many different places in the world. Some of my very best friends are ones that I've met at conferences. And I've found many opportunities to collaborate with others there too.

You can find a great deal of free items at conferences, too. Honestly, people are very generous in this community and willingly share their knowledge with others. It's amazing. We share knowledge, we talk to people. It's fun and that's what open education is really about. It's

an open community. We welcome everyone, no matter how long they have been involved in the industry. We will help you find your path. It is what open education is all about.

8.) What do you think is the biggest challenge that the profession of Instructional Design currently faces? And that can be for either the educational or corporate side, or both if you like.

For higher education, the greatest challenge is to get and stay on board with online education and its different modalities. They must work toward a balance between online education and maintaining a brick-and-mortar experience. That has been a huge challenge, especially since Covid. College enrollments are continuing to decrease. In my opinion, colleges don't realize it, but the generation that they are marketing themselves to is not the generation this is currently in college. For example, there is still a lot of talk about catering to millennial learners, but millennials are already in the workforce. Some are already in their thirties and forties.

Higher education needs to pivot because Gen Alpha is coming up, and they need to be prepared for jobs that don't currently exist as well as what's currently on the market. The college experience is to prepare learners to step into the workforce. If universities are no longer preparing students as they should, then they are doing an injustice to those students. If students don't think a university is providing them with a relevant experience, they will go elsewhere. So, people in higher education need to open their minds a just a bit more

Identifying the greatest challenge for corporate is difficult because every company is unique. I would say that corporate-level instructional designers should stay open to exploring innovative technologies and integrating more LMS tools. There should be more communication, too. I have noticed that higher education has more connected community than the corporate level designers. This is often due to company policies proprietary issues.

9.) My final official question is a little off topic. Basically, between Amazon, Touro, your blog, consultations, etc., how do you find the time to juggle it all? How do you manage your work-life balance?

This is something that is still a challenge for me, especially since I recently transitioned to a new career.

I try to schedule time for myself on my calendar each day. I also use my calendar to adjust my workload. For example, I am currently scheduling fewer fifteen-minute talks that I used to because I must focus on Amazon. You must be able to schedule your time well and stick to it.

One thing that I do is break my time into 25-minute segments and only focus on one thing at a time during each segment. I have a timer set on my computer. You don't realize how long 25 minutes is, but it is amazing what you can complete in that time. I've found that I'm less productive when I move away from this system.

Working from home has also helped, but scheduling is the most important thing.

10.) Finally, this has been a short interview and we've barely scratched the surface, but do you have anything else or any other advice you would like to share before we close?

Instructional design is going to continue to be a growing field in both education and the corporate world. And it is going to continue to evolve. Instructional designers are more than just designers; they are project managers, they are creative, they are graphic designers.

COVID was a terrible, terrible thing, but it has brought the recognition to the field that instructional designers have wanted for a long time. Because of the pandemic, faculty, students, and corporate trainers had to rely heavily on instructional designers for help and support.

It's exciting to see us finally being recognized. Instructional designers are on the forefront and on stage. And the field is going to continue to change with all of the advances in technology, especially AI.

SECTION 2: ANALYTICAL REFLECTION

With a self-professed type-A personality, Holly Owens had become a jack-of-all-trades in the world of instructional design. As an adjunct professor at Toro University, where she teaches future IT professionals, Owens has her foot firmly planted in the realm of higher education. But she is also now making a mark in the hectic corporate world of Amazon. Aside

from that, she recently posted the 56th episode of the “EdUp EdTech Podcast”, her own personal podcast that can be streamed on several major platforms such as Spotify and Apple Podcasts. With such a wide background, Owens is a great resource for both future and current instructional design professionals. And she is more than happy to share her expertise and insights on the fields of instructional design and instructional technology.

I found Owens’s thoughts on the current state of and the future of instructional design to be very interesting. I had never considered how the field was viewed prior to the COVID pandemic. It seems that it was a field often overlooked by others. But COVID pushed instructional design into the spotlight and brought more recognition to its professionals. Owens thinks that the future will continue to be bright. She pointed out how the profession has become more and more global in nature. It is no longer limited to certain regions or countries as more and more institutions and industries discover the value of instructional design. She sees the use of artificial intelligence as a particular strong point of future growth for the instructional design field.

This continued expansion is something that I have seen in my own work in the Department of Public Health at the University of Tennessee. The implementation of an online program within the department has led to a doubling of the number of applications we receive. There has also been a dramatic increase in the number of international applicants as well. Our online courses were designed with the help of an external instructional design firm, something that I had never heard of prior to the pandemic. The number of new students we have enrolled in our online program perfectly illustrates the value that talented instructional designers bring to the table.

But Owens isn’t the only person optimistic about the future growth of the industry. In fact, labor market data research estimates the field will increase at least 14 percent through 2025. (Franklin University, n.d.)

While I can’t say that any of the information that Owens shared affected my own career goals, I feel that she did expand my own views of the field. Several topics she covered were things that I had not previously considered. First of all, I found it surprising that she felt that professionals working in higher education, while they might be resistant to change, are a much more sharing community than their counterparts working in the corporate world. This is something I had never considered, but after speaking with her it makes sense. Corporations by

their very nature are more protective of their knowledge least competitors take advantage. It's very ironic that that the area of the field most focused on innovation would also be the more tight-lipped about those innovations. But despite this, instructional design professionals, no matter what part of the industry they are in, are surprisingly giving. This was something that Owens pointed out, but it was also something that I had previously noticed as well. I am still surprised as the number of resources that IT professions make available to their colleagues free of charge. For example, Owens herself sets aside time to schedule meetings with anyone seeking advice, whether they are a newcomer or an instructional design veteran. And she only charges a consulting fee if the meeting runs longer than 15 minutes.

I found Owens's advice to newcomers to the field to be quite interesting. She stated that individuals wishing to break into the field of instructional design should make a catalogue of their own skills, no matter what field their previous experience is in. They should then rework those skills in a way that makes them apply to instructional technology. This is advice that others in the field have mentioned as well. In addition to the project management skills that Owens mentioned, soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and creativity are valuable skills for an instructional designer to have (Da Silva, 2022).

Transitioning the skills you already have into something more IT-centric seems like it would also help with another issues I discussed with Owens - imposter syndrome. Those skills can form the basis of a strong foundation to build upon. And strengthening foundations is one of the key elements that Owens listed as a way to combat imposter syndrome. As someone who frequently deals with imposter syndrome and low confidence, I found it Owens's advice on the subject to be very helpful. I appreciated her candor in admitting that even she deals with feelings of imposter syndrome on a regular basis. Somehow knowing that even experts in the field feel of unsure of themselves at times helped my own confidence level. The thought that not being alone with those feelings actually made me feel validated in my own skills.

I particularly liked her comment about setting aside time each day for training as a way to combat imposter syndrome. In fact, after the interview, I challenged myself to do the same in my own life. While I am starting slow, I have already managed to complete at least two hours of additional training in the past week alone.

Also, I have always tended to be a little cynical about membership in professional organizations and conferences attendance. I had a hard time grasping the value of them,

particularly when membership fees are so expensive. But Owens made many valid statements about their value. Conferences are not simply trade shows, but places to connect and share ideas. At one point in the interview, she told a story about meeting a group of people at one conference. None of the group had ever met before, but, by the end of the conference, they were discussing plans to present together in the future. The very next year, the group was presenting at the same conference where they had originally met. Owens described the experience of attending conference as the epitome of open education. People are there to freely share their ideas with others in the field.

I also appreciated Owens's focus on economics. She encouraged people, especially those new to the field, to take advantage of free resources. Instead of joining every professional organization or attending every conference, first research to determine if that organization actually appeals to your career interests. If your organization has a group membership in an organization, then take advantage of it. Use free trials to explore software programs before making purchases.

In short, Owens is a big proponent of open education, and her professional life shows this. She is passionate about her career and eager to share her knowledge. She struck me as someone who has found fulfillment in her career choice and wants others to also find that same level of fulfillment as well.

References

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