# Executive Interview

2021

Totara is transforming workplace learning with a powerful, flexible and open platform that adapts to the unique needs of your business.

**LARS HYLAND**

*CLO*
*Totara Learning*

**RACHEL COOKE**

*COO and Podcast Host*
*Brandon Hall Group*

totara

Whether your needs are learning management (LMS), performance management or employee engagement, Totara has it covered.

## About Lars Hyland

**Lars Hyland** is a well-known figure in the HR and workplace learning community, advocating the adoption of adaptable and flexible technology designed to support the new world of work. Lars is an expert in the field of Talent Experience, that brings together learning, engagement and performance management practices to drive employee satisfaction and productivity.

## About Rachel Cooke

**Rachel Cooke** is Brandon Hall Group's Chief Operating Officer and Principal HCM Analyst. She is responsible for business operations, including client and member advisory services, marketing design, annual awards programs, conferences and the company's project management functions. She also leads Advancing Women in the Workplace and Diversity and Inclusion initiatives, research and events. Rachel worked in the HCM research industry for 15 years and held several key management and executive positions within the Talent and Learning Research, and Performance Improvement industries.

### RACHEL

Lars, can you share a bit about yourself and your background?

### RACHEL

What is the culture like at Totara Learning and how does it impact the way you work with your clients?

### LARS

I'm one of the few people who started in learning technology, also termed multimedia or hypermedia, in the early '80s/late '90s when technology was much more rudimentary than it is now. Technology wasn't connected in the same way we enjoy it today. It's fascinating to think back to those days of creating interactive learning or training experiences using what technology was available at the time, which allowed us to do quite sophisticated things. All these years later, there is very slick technology that enables people to talk to anyone globally, given there is a decent connection. Interestingly though, learning design thinking has changed very little over time. We are seemingly stuck in traditional modes of thought, which could change more radically going forward, especially looking ahead into the immediate term. The rate of change we are experiencing now and the fresh sets of skills needed in organizations are being radically affected by the digital transformation push. I've been fascinated by this for decades. I am still passionate about seeing advanced tools being used more effectively by those interested in moving the dial regarding people's performance in their jobs. There's so much we could be doing better and that's something positive I believe we are doing here at Totara Learning.

### LARS

Totara Learning is about 10 years old and was born virtually from Wellington, New Zealand, to Brighton, UK. We rapidly grew through strong, collaborative partnering with different learning technology specialists worldwide from those early origins. We now have 1,500 organizations amongst many sectors, using Totara to support enterprise-use of their learning and development, performance management and engagement. How were we able to effectively manage the worst time zone difference between New Zealand and the UK? We dedicated ourselves to having open, collaborative and transparent communication as we grew. We now have about 100 people from around the world and while we are still relatively small in the scheme of things, we are growing quickly. The very positive culture leverages our technology. We use Totara in our company to support ourselves, and as a result, it keeps us close to the customer experience — the good, the bad and what could be better. It's very important to do that.

*(continued)*

That collaborative, open nature was borne out because the technology itself is open. It's open-source, which speaks to one of the real growing needs of organizations right now — more control over these platforms to differentiate themselves and meet changing business needs, which is dramatically more challenging now than ever before. The horizon we must plan on has shrunk from years to months. Organizations need to be able to turn quickly and agilely and be able to learn and adapt effectively. At Totara, we've had to adapt throughout this past decade of work. Our talent-experience platform is well-suited to support organizations moving forward when they have these similar challenges. The pandemic has forced organizations to either adapt or confront the fact that they can't adapt. Many organizations haven't been that affected and have been quite brittle in the face of such dramatic change. We've seen some interesting examples of organizations flexibly changing in the face of quite drastic changes around the world.

## RACHEL

Can you share a few client stories about their challenges and successes?

## LARS

Over the past 12 months, we've had many healthcare organizations use Totara for full range training, reaching thousands of people in their organizations. In the UK, the NHS, which has about 1.3 million workers collectively, had a significant percentage of those receiving their training through our platform. As in many countries, there was an immediate need to stand up hospitals and people not fully trained on ventilators and other care needs throughout the pandemic. In the face of the high demand for hospitals, many more people needed training. Our platform facilitated that through access to necessary training, scaling accordingly. Another example is a healthcare institute in Italy that jumped in one month from a standard service for 40,000 healthcare professionals across the country to 450,000, which is significant. Many of our customers have done great work and managed to win some exciting awards because of their ability to adapt quickly.

## RACHEL

It's interesting how far open source has come in the past few years. Why are heavily regulated industries now accepting and using open-source technology?

## LARS

That speaks to a common myth about open source, which is that it can't be secure, doesn't scale and there are problems. That's a truism of any software. It doesn't matter whether it's open-source or otherwise. If the software is poorly designed or not maintained well, it can have those challenges.

**What is positive and different about open source** is that an organization can unilaterally make necessary improvements or integrations, independently of a roadmap that marches forward.

We have a roadmap that marches forward and most of our organizations stick to it. But increasingly, in the current climate and as we look ahead, we need to offer organizations control to have the freedom to do things differently when they need their businesses and people to respond. The alternative we see quite a lot is a black-box software solution which works right now, but in six months, when business needs change, you may find yourself with a solution that's no longer a solution anymore; it's not fit for purpose. It may be feature-based or commercially based, and you may be stuck with it. While learning management systems have evolved, they also have a bad rap because of those situations. People get stuck with it and don't use it because it's not aligned with the organization's new sets of needs. We don't see that happening as much because our partner network can localize and meet specific sector or regulatory requirements. For example, we work closely with the USDA, a strong advocate of our platform due to its openness and flexibility to meet specific needs. They can roll out to a complex organization of around 2,000 administrators who need to use the platform flexibly. We're seeing increasing interest in having that level of control but not just on the learning side. It's about bringing together all the components that underpin people's motivation to perform well and develop in their roles. As HR professionals, we need to think differently about how we organize ourselves to support that going forward.

## RACHEL

What do you predict will be the next industry disrupters and how can we prepare for them?

## LARS

I have many thoughts on how things will transpire. The World Economic Forum produced a report last October looking at the future skills mix needed to stay relevant in the workplace as organizations accelerate their digital transformation pathways. Like our experience with the pandemic, we are moving into a new area with all sorts of genetic improvements and the ability to transform the pace of vaccines, for example.

*(continued)*

More and more industries and sectors are turning into information technology ones, which drives transformation. That then drives considerable changes in the job roles and the skills mix needed. The World Economic Forum report also pinpoints 10 critical skillsets that broadly sit in the categories of soft skills, such as communicating more effectively and being more sophisticated in our use of technology. We'll be working with much more innovative technology imminently, so how do we engage with that and how do we understand what that technology is guiding us to do? There are many ethical issues that we will need to have a good handle on. We need to find ways to build those skills in our people and we can't just recruit them. There are not enough people out there with those skills, so that is a flawed strategy to adopt.

It's also thinking beyond the learning aspect of it. If people are going to be adaptable, they need to be resilient, aligned around a common purpose and roll with change, whether positively roll with change or resist certain change in positive ways. So, how do they do that? It's not just

> **If people are going to be adaptable, they need to be resilient, aligned around a common purpose and roll with change, whether positively roll with change or resist certain change in positive ways.**

about training people. It's also about giving them feedback and guidance, which is a continuous process going forward. It's less about the annual appraisal, which is too slow. It needs to be more about continuous access to peer and expert feedback across the organization. More of a coach and mentor type of culture should be more predominant. Combining those is what we've tried to do with the talent experience platform. We bring together these typically separate components and often separate systems inside organizations. It is a result of HR functions being a bit more siloed than they should be. Performance management happens with one team, L&D occurs in another area and leadership-type activities in another: it's too fragmented. Individuals in organizations like that may find themselves quite confused by the fragmented and unaligned messaging coming through to them. Equipping organizations with the tools, technology and talent-experience platform to align these areas will produce better results and outcomes for an organization and its people.
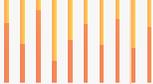
## Q RACHEL

Thank you so much for joining me today to share some of your expertise. If anybody would like to follow up with you, what's the best way to reach you?

## A LARS

I'd encourage everyone to visit our **website**, which has many valuable resources and a complete listing of our upcoming webinars. If you want to reach out to me directly, I'm on **LinkedIn**.

**To Listen to the Interview on Brandon Hall Group's HCMxRadio**

**CLICK HERE**