Voices from the Field

Current Trends and Challenges in Instructional Design and Learning Technology

ONLINE LEARNING™ CONSORTIUM

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VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Current Trends and Challenges in Instructional Design and Learning Technology

Abstract

This qualitative study interviewed twelve (n=12) instructional design and learning technology leaders from the K12, higher education, nonprofit, and corporate sectors to identify trends and challenges that were impacting their work and the work of their teams. Results included technology trends (e.g., artificial intelligence, augmented and virtual reality), broader conceptual learning shifts (e.g., microlearning, deeper levels of engagement in learning experiences), and various challenges (e.g., balancing exploring emerging trends with increasing day-to-day work creating workload and burnout concerns, managing change through bureaucracy and resistance).

Keywords: instructional design, learning technology, trends, challenges, artificial intelligence, workload

Introduction

In the rapidly evolving landscape of instructional design and learning technology (IDLT), leaders face a wide variety of trends and challenges that significantly influence the work they do across sectors (e.g., K12, higher education, corporate, and nonprofit). As a community, it is important to consistently work together to recognize and understand teaching, learning, and technology trends, reviewing current literature and digging deeper to inform the future of IDLT work. As we forge ahead in a post-pandemic world, it is important to explore how the world has changed, how we have changed, and how learning across sectors has changed, which inevitably shifts why and how we do what we do in the field.

With a focus on IDLT across sector settings, this publication strives to uncover important trends and challenges shaping the current experience for IDLT professionals. With this focus at the forefront, we look to build upon the existing body of knowledge in the IDLT field and provide a nuanced overview of the factors shaping the current and future work of IDLT professionals across sectors.

Literature Review

By examining current literature, our team explored recent trends and challenges IDLT leaders and professionals are currently facing. This literature focused on technology and non-technology trends, as well as related challenges.

Technology Trends

Technology trends are important for IDLT leaders and professionals to stay abreast of and upskill around because technological applications will continue to grow as learning advances to meet the demand for online and distance learning, as well as advancements in pedagogy (Nworie, 2021). Across recent major sector publications like EdTech's K12 Magazine (Torchia, 2024) and Training Industry (Sanders & Keating, 2024), as well as EDUCAUSE's 2023 Horizon Report and EDUCAUSE's most recent research on higher education's workforce (Muscanell, 2024), one trend was prevalent: artificial intelligence (AI). Moreover, these pieces of literature broke the surface of AI more generally, diving more deeply into use. In the K12 space, the focus was on how AI can support teachers, while the higher education space was interested in applications for personalizing learning, with corporate learning more focused on preparing their workforce to partner with AI (Educause, 2023; Sanders & Keating, 2024; Torchia, 2024).

Beyond AI, Torchia (2024) documented additional technology trends across K12 schools and districts surrounding technologies to manage device lifecycles, networks, security, and physical safety, as well as applications to support prevention and mental health efforts. In higher education, EDUCAUSE (2023) describes disruption in the online vs. face-to-face dichotomy with technologies being used to support multimodal learning, as well as the need for low-cost and easy-to-use technologies to create engaging content for learners. Similarly, in corporate learning, engaging content through technologies that promoted personalization, gamification, and virtual reality were cited as popular trends (Cloud Assess, 2024; Inkling, 2024).

While recent literature featured technology-driven trends, technologies were not the only trends viewed as reshaping the IDLT field.

Broader Conceptual Learning Trends

Trends that were cited in these recent major publications did not always specify a particular technology; rather featuring teaching, learning, and work trends more broadly. While K12 focused on technologies to help physical safety and mental health efforts, higher education focused more on sense of belonging, inclusivity, and connectedness efforts that were non-tech and more practice-based on nature, as well as larger educational conceptual shifts (EDUCAUSE, 2023; Torchia, 2024). These larger conceptual shifts included blurring the lines between modalities, exploring HyFlex, and examining microcredentialing to better meet student needs across their learning and career lifecycle (EDUCAUSE, 2023). More interest in various modalities (e.g., online, hybrid, and distance learning) and digital literacy around new technologies, like AI, created increased time demands for IDLT professionals, particularly in preparing instructors via training and development efforts (Muscanell, 2024). Corporate instructional designers are focusing on preparing their organizations for the future and doing so in a way that coalesces with the flow of work, considering microlearning strategies as well as gamification to engage employees in learning (Cloud Assess, 2024; CTDO Next, 2024; Inkling, 2024). To prepare for the future of work, they are surfacing the human side of emerging technology tools, like AI, increasing communication, leadership, emotional intelligence, resilience, and adaptability to prepare their teams and organizations for change as part of a continuous learning process (Cloud Assess, 2024; Sanders & Keating, 2024).

While technology and broader conceptual learning trends are driving the work of IDLT leaders and professionals, these trends create additional challenges that also influence the work of these individuals.

Challenges

Muscanell (2024) described excessive workloads and burnout as a large challenge for IDLT professionals, particularly in the higher education sector, with 82% of their survey respondents indicating they had experienced a lot of burnout within the past 12 months. Relatedly, they also found that 85% of their respondents indicated having more than one primary area of responsibility, positing that this may continue to increase due to budgeting constraints and that institutions will need to prioritize employee well-being by identifying

ways to create manageable workloads (Muscanell, 2024). Advancements in technology and broader conceptual learning shifts can make it difficult for IDLT professionals to stay abreast of new developments on top of their day-to-day responsibilities, increasing time spent supporting change management efforts and providing responsive professional development (Educause, 2023; Muscanell 2024; Scoppio, 2017; Xie et al., 2021).

With these technology and broader conceptual learning trends and challenges at the center, the purpose of this study is to contribute to the current literature by delving deeper into what trends and challenges are driving IDLT efforts in our post-pandemic world. More specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

- What trends do employers across sectors see for the IDLT field and their IDLT employees?
- What challenges do employers across sectors see for the IDLT field and their IDLT employees?

Methods

This study utilized a qualitative design to explore trends and challenges for IDLT leaders and their teams. In this section, researcher positionality, participant recruitment, as well as data collection and analysis procedures, will be further described.

Researcher Positionality

Given the qualitative component included in this study, the research team would like to acknowledge our reflexivity in the study's research process, sharing our experience with this topic and how that may shape our interpretations (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The research team was led by the first author, who has held various staff-level and leadership roles and instructional design-related positions since 2007 in the higher education and nonprofit sectors. In addition, she currently coordinates an instructional design and learning technology master's degree program. Two members of the research team (the second and third authors) are students in this master's degree program, and one member of the research team (the fourth author) is an alumnus of the master's program, now working in the higher education sector. Due to the research team's collective roles in coordination and as students, the team was motivated to learn about what IDLT leaders were experiencing in their positions as a way to prepare for future work, enhance the program, and contribute to the field's larger understanding of these roles.

Participant Recruitment

After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, the first author shared the study's recruitment message on instructional design and learning technology-related Facebook and LinkedIn groups. Additionally, the research team members shared the recruitment message personally on Facebook, Linkedin, and Twitter (now X) to extend the reach of the recruitment message. The first three individuals who completed the recruitment survey in each of the four focus sectors (i.e., K12, higher education, corporate, and non-profit) and had leadership experience (i.e., broadly defined as overseeing a team or being a team of one) were enrolled in the study. Twelve (n=12) individuals who led instructional design efforts with their organizations were interviewed by the research team. The following table

further describes each participant's sector, title, years in the field, and self-identified demographics (reported in their own words).

Pseudonym	Sector	Title	Years in the Field	Self-Identified Demographics
Alan	K12	Innovation Coordinator for Instructional Technology	Over 15 years	White, male
Jennifer	K12	Technology Integration Specialist	0 - 4 years	Not specified
Christopher	K12	Instructional Technology Coordinator	Over 15 years	Not specified
Andrew	Higher Education	Director, Instructional Design & Assessment	10 - 14 years	White, male
Ann	Higher Education	Director of Instructional Design & Technology, Associate Provost	Over 15 years	Caucasian, female
Michael	Higher Education	Executive Director, Center for Teaching & Learning	Over 15 years	White, male
James	Corporate	Manager, Learning & Development	Over 15 years	White, male
Tina	Corporate	Interim Director, Organizational Development	0 - 4 years	White, female
Donna	Corporate	Chief Academic Officer	Over 15 years	White, female
Benjamin	Nonprofit	Assistant Vice President of Learning	10 - 14 years	White non-Hispanic, man
Leslie	Nonprofit	Director of Instructional Technology & Blended Learning	10 - 14 years	White, Native American female
April	Nonprofit	Senior Manager, Education & Learning Technology	5 - 9 years	White, female

After obtaining informed consent, the research team conducted twelve (n=12) semi-structured interviews via Webex audio between July and September 2023. All interviews were roughly one hour long and captured using the recording tool in Webex. Participants were asked to share context about their organization and role before describing their team, as well as trends and challenges both they as leaders and their teams were currently facing.

Data Analysis

The research team utilized an adapted Creswell & Creswell's (2023) qualitative data analysis process that included: 1) organizing and preparing the data for analysis; 2) reading through all of the data; 3) coding the data; 4) identifying themes by grouping the codes; 5) developing a storyline interpretation by connecting the themes; and 6) interpreting the data. Each research team member coded at least three transcripts and checked at least three additional transcripts done by another team member, interrogating the codes to ensure accuracy and fit. To support reliability, the team reviewed transcripts to eliminate mistakes in transcription, defined codes to support consistency among coders in the coding process, and cross-checked one another's codes. To ensure validity, the research team utilized member checking by summarizing the findings and sharing them with the interviewees, and adhered to presenting discrepant findings as they emerged. To protect participant identities, pseudonyms were assigned to participants and used in reporting.

Results

Data analysis revealed both popular technology and broader educational trends and challenges that IDLT leaders are experiencing as they design, develop, and support learning experiences across sectors (i.e., K12, higher education, corporate, and nonprofit).

Popular Trends

Interview data analysis revealed a number of trends that IDLT leaders were seeing as a part of their work. These focused on 1) artificial intelligence (AI); 2) additional technologies; and 3) broader conceptual learning shifts.

Artificial Intelligence (AI)

As Leslie, a leader from the nonprofit space, stated, “I would assume your number one answer right now is artificial intelligence.” Leslie was accurate; across sectors, employers had one technology trend at the top of their minds during their interviews — AI. Alan, a leader from the K12 sector, agreed that AI was definitely a trend he was seeing and mentioned that while AI has been a big trend, it was not necessarily a surprising trend: “Most certainly, artificial intelligence is one of those things that has been big recently, but I would say that it has been big for a while. We've been preparing for or thinking about it, kind of considering it, for probably 5 years.”

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>
> - **Alan (K12)**

However, even with AI being a trend that IDLT professionals have known about for some time, it has hit some IDLT professionals quite profoundly. Michael, a leader from the higher education sector, described that for his team and university, “there's been a huge interest

in A.I., and that has hit everyone like a train." According to the interviewees, this train is moving at full speed, with them and their teams of IDLT professionals exploring how AI tools can be used in their work and the work of their schools, institutions, and organizations. Jennifer, from the K12 sector, shared that she was thinking about how to leverage AI to make teaching more efficient and enjoyable:

> ...so one of my biggest wonderings and what I want to really learn about right now – like, I can't wait – when things settle down, is to just dive into artificial intelligence and how it makes a teacher's life more enjoyable and how you can make just the daily things we do more efficient and quick – to have that little assistant in your pocket.

Interviewees also reflected on the importance of understanding the impact of this trend on the future of learning and work. Jennifer continued to explain that she would like to understand what AI means for students:

> I think that if we embrace AI the right way, even if students embraced AI, like, what does that mean for students? If they were to use AI, I think we would see them be engaged and grow exponentially. I would think human growth, no matter if you were the teacher or the student, your growth trajectory would be amazing.

Other interviewees, like Donna from the corporate sector, predicted exciting changes AI could spur in areas like accessibility: "I think there'll be advances within tools that we currently use on a regular basis that will be really cool. So probably the most exciting changes I see in that space is anywhere we get better accessibility."

Donna also explained that we would likely see changes with AI-infused tools and that it will be important for educational-focused sectors, like K12 and higher education, to carefully think about supporting instead of limiting use to support future use of these tools in the workforce:

> All of the functionality that comes into Google products, Microsoft products that are going to make it easier, faster--you know, to be able to do the work that we do and

> for students to be able to do the work that they do. I think if we're going to limit students' use of productivity tools when they're going through their educational journey, then we're making a huge mistake because they're going to use them in the world of work.

At the forefront of AI, IDLT professionals are often at the cutting edge of learning the tools as part of their own work to put themselves in positions to empower others, as Leslie from the nonprofit space shared: "I've done a couple of trainings on it, just to show teachers that artificial intelligence is out there and what it can be used for."

Of course, designing and delivering training took on multiple modalities, with Tina mentioning training for her organization generally leveraged a mix of live instructor-led content and eLearning content.

While interviewees acknowledged the trend of AI, they were not always pleased with how much focus there was on this emerging tool. As Benjamin, from the nonprofit space, noted when he was asked about what trends he was seeing in his work, he was reluctant to mention AI because it was all-encompassing, causing a trend-based fatigue and burnout:

> It's like, I don't even want to say generative AI because … you know, it's everywhere, and it's being talked about everywhere. I think the problem is it's just debating everything, and I know it's supposed to be a trend that changes everything. But sometimes, I think we might get a little burned out that it's going to change everything.

For better or worse, AI is a trend that participants brought up consistently in their interviews. Some participants discussed thinking about AI for a long time and conveyed excitement for leveraging tools to support the work they were doing; others shared they were not only tasked with learning these tools for themselves, but to support their organizations as well. While AI was by far the most mentioned technology trend, it was not the only technology-related trend that was mentioned among the interviewees.

Additional Technology Trends

Beyond AI, interviewees described a number of additional technology trends they were actively exploring to enhance learning and work within their schools, institutions, and organizations. One of the most common drivers for technology use was personalizing experiences for learners, as Alan from the K12 sector described: “Then the other area is, how do we utilize technology to make student learning more personalized.”

Similar to Alan, James, from the corporate sector, explained a trend he was seeing around paying for coaches at his organization, who offer a more personalized training approach, and how through personalized scenario-based solutions, they were working to reduce training costs and provide a better experience for more individuals at his organization rather than a select few:

> “We've seen a phenomenon where there's an overreliance on paying for coaches, both at the executive and the non-executive level, as opposed to wanting a training solution because it feels conversational, it feels more personalized and specific. So, we really are looking into developing many scenarios that are personalized and focused on our ecosystem.”
>
> - **James (Corporate)**

Michael, from the higher education space, shared that he had his eye on adaptive learning technologies as a way to personalize learning and was excited that the adaptive learning technology to personalize learning was starting to become more wildly available due to technological advancements related to AI: “I really think the future of personalization is adaptive, and AI is actually going to speed that up. The technology is there, finally. The idea has been around for a long time--personalized learning, but the technology is really there.”

While personalized and adaptive learning was of interest to many interviewees, other technologies were also mentioned. Leslie, from the nonprofit sector, shared that their “current emerging trend is virtual reality devices” and Ann, from the higher education

sector shared that they were doing a small pilot test to review virtual reality content and activities. Similarly, in the K12 space, Christopher mentioned that they were researching augmented and virtual reality options. Alan, from K12, also mentioned that both virtual and augmented reality were on his radar, as were many science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM)-related supportive technologies: "...it's not really a maker space, but 3D printing and STEM design--using technology as a design tool has been part of it for modeling and things like that. And then, robotics and a lot of it is STEM-related."

Beyond AI, participants honed in on additional technologies that focused on personalizing and deepening their learning experiences (e.g., adaptive learning tools, virtual and augmented reality, STEM supports). However, technologies were not the only trends mentioned by interviewees. Many also described a number of broader conceptual learning trends that their schools, institutions, and organizations were seeing.

Broader Conceptual Learning Shifts

When asked about trends they were seeing, IDLT leaders spoke about broader educational trends (e.g., online learning, microlearning, competency-based education, moving to deeper levels of engagement with their learners, the mental health crisis) that were impacting their teams, and the way they did their work. Donna, from the corporate sector, commented on larger trends across educational spaces she was seeing around the shift in enrollments, as well as location and modalities preferred by undergraduate students and the focus on workforce readiness:

> Our population of undergraduate students is dipping to an all-time low. Students are going to programs that are fully online rather than face-to-face, mostly because it's more affordable for them, and students are staying home longer. They're going to school online, which is causing online enrollment to go up while traditional student enrollment is going down. Universities are starting to think more and more about how they continue to increase their enrollments or at least maintain them, and the way to do that is to go after the lifelong learning and workforce preparedness population with microcredentials or short microbursts of learning,

> whatever that is, but skills forward so that students can articulate the skills that they have in order to get the next job.

Similar to the focus on meeting learners where they are with flexible and affordable learning experiences that focus on skills, Andrew, from the higher education sector, shared that his institution was exploring competency-based education (CBE):

> As an institution, we've talked about CBE, how to tackle CBE, and how my unit is supposed to position itself has been an ongoing question. But we see CBE continually being returned to, and I do feel like, eventually, the right things will land in place, and we'll be working on these questions. Maybe won't be strict CBE or be CBE in certain senses in practice, but I think there's been a lot of emphasis on prior learning and giving credit for prior learning.

Andrew also described larger learning design changes he was seeing, explaining that his team was seeing a shift in questions they were receiving from instructors that moved deeper, from technical to social engagement questions to drive learning:

> "I think increasingly the questions have changed from the technical to the social…like, how do I create community? How do I know that my students are actually reading the stuff, watching the video, getting engaged? And that piece is where I think increasingly they're asking instructional designers--how do I build community?"
>
> - **Andrew (Higher Ed)**

Michael, from the higher education sector, also mentioned a transition to a deeper focus like "active learning and different kinds of engagement strategies" and that his team was playing off a focus on community and engagement to build professional learning communities to support this work.

Interviewees also mentioned a few additional trends, including mental health and diversity, equity, and inclusion, which Benjamin from the nonprofit sector explained:

> From the student support angle, we're really focusing on student mental health. We also focus on blended and digital learning, which encompasses any modality at the institutional level. You know, even face-to-face classes have digital aspects… I think that's been a big piece as well--trying to sort out how to support those students who are having challenges there also. Another ongoing important focus is around equity and inclusion, ensuring that students in their courses and in their programs are really feeling like they belong and that they have the tools that they need to really be successful in their courses."

While technology trends (e.g., AI, AR/VR) and conceptual learning shifts (e.g., microcredentialing, CBE, student mental health) were on the minds of IDLT leaders, they also discussed how these trends and challenges created challenges for their IDLT teams.

Key Challenges

Interview data analysis revealed a number of areas that IDLT leaders deemed challenging as a part of their work. These included 1) balancing how they were to explore emerging trends among day-to-day expectations and limitations; 2) the slow pace of organizational change; 3) creating the "right" fits for their team; and 4) the siloing of their work within the organization.

Balancing Exploring Emerging Trends and Day-to-Day Expectations

Employers shared that it was sometimes difficult to stay on top of emerging trends and apply them to their organizational work, particularly with smaller staffs, tight budgets, and increasing workloads from additional expectations and responsibilities. Alan, a leader in the K12 space, said he found challenges in staying focused and not getting mired in today and continuing to be able to envision future needs, as well as how tools keep emerging and keeping an eye on how to apply them to their schools:

"... that is a challenge, you know, kind of staying up to date and current, but also being able to look 4 to 5 years out. . . I think another challenge is simply the amount, the proliferation of tools and content. We're fairly saturated as an industry right now . . . it's a challenge to decipher and bring that into our own context as to how we want to go forward with whatever it may be . . . keeping up with the constant rate of change and the rapid rate of change in technology specifically. But also, in practices that support those technologies. So, when something changes or when something new is introduced, it's not just that it's introduced, it's that we have to support that, have to provide ongoing support. So, it spreads us out a little thinner than we would like to be."

- **Alan (K12)**

Similar to Alan, James from the corporate sector also mentioned the pace of tools emerging and the challenge of integrating these advancements with quality:

> . . . the speed at which tools are coming out . . . even companies in the learning and development space can quickly scale up training by building an entire course in 2 days. I don't know if it's any good, but a lot of those things are coming out and are coming out fast. I don't think we're prepared to say, yes, we were willing to buy into that product or not have that stand as a flagship learning experience.

James also shared that expectations regarding the quality of learning experiences and video, in particular, in the corporate sector are increasing without changing timeline expectations:

> . . . corporate must have polished video. Video is hugely important in almost all of our learning and design spaces, and I didn't see that as much in higher ed . . . [our] production quality has definitely gone up, and we expect it to be higher, and then frankly, the timelines aren't always realistic to the production quality interest that the folks have . . .

While video production expectations were increasing for James' team, he was also finding challenges with lack of investment into a more advanced video management infrastructure:

> . . . oddly, our company that has invested well in pretty much everything from a technology infrastructure standpoint has not invested historically in a video management solution. Now, it probably comes from our data security disposition, but we definitely need an infrastructure or tool to help organize the growing body of content that we are creating. Particularly as we've learned new modalities in the last few years. Right now, videos are stored on Google Drive, and it is not a good tool for when you get videos longer than like 5 minutes. It freezes just based on the way Google is built.

Similar to James, other interviewees shared challenges with a lack of budget and investment from their organizations, institutions, and schools into the tools they needed. April, a leader from the nonprofit space, shared that nonprofits are challenged with smaller budgets which create a limited ability to fully run IDLT processes and delve into different emerging technology tools:

> . . . we're on a limited budget, especially with being a nonprofit . . . my boss, she does a lot on the research side . . . some of these research surveys that people went out and things like that--we don't have the time or the human resources, we don't have the people to execute all of these processes . . . budget wise too, because now, there are so many technology options that it's like, hey, great, but you have to really figure out how much you're actually going to use it; how much it costs, and then what's going to play into it.

With limited budgets being a popular challenge shared among participants, Jennifer from the K12 space and Leslie from the nonprofit space, also expressed frustration with not having access to the technology and related infrastructure to support their teachers and learners to the level they need to create and maintain engaging and effective learning experiences.

With technologies, practices, and advancing infrastructures emerging in the field, leaders were also concerned about workload when it came to exploring and applying technologies among their other responsibilities, particularly as it related to smaller teams and budget implications. Benjamin, a leader in the nonprofit IDLT space, was concerned about how versatile IDLT professionals can be, which can be a burden:

> "... budgets are lean, and we are being asked to do more with the same amount of resources . . . I think that ends up being a real slippery slope. It's just as a group, I know this is kind of stereotyping, but I think IDs are often sort of the Swiss army knife, right? They can perform so many different functions and have a great set of skills, even though maybe it's just about the knife, but they also have a toothpick in there and a screwdriver, and then they'll clip exactly whatever you need, and then it's the curse of competence very quickly—you can get a lot thrust upon you."
>
> - **Benjamin (Non-Profit)**

Interestingly enough, even with the workload challenges that come with IDLT work, leaders expressed exasperation with the slow pace of change in their schools, institutions, and organizations.

The Slow Pace of Change

Many of the leaders across sectors in this study remarked that even though technology is difficult to keep up with, one of their largest challenges was change management and the slow pace of change and bureaucracy that came with it, as well as having the time to create strategic directions while supporting day-to-day work.

As a leader in the higher education space, Andrew mentioned the rapid change and getting their users on board:

> I think part of the challenge is that we're at an institution that's continually evolving and being able to do change management. I think one of those challenges is getting people on board--people who are busy, people who can't stop working because we're changing the plane as it's flying, so to speak. It's challenging getting people to move and trying to make that as smooth and as pleasant an experience for my staff as possible, I think, is one of the biggest challenges I face.

Alan, from the K12 leadership space, also mentioned change management and the resistance to change:

> . . . [a] challenge is change management. It's really looking at managing the change that has come because of COVID or because of content, or because of new technologies or whatever, but being able to manage that in a meaningful way . . . we definitely have challenges when it comes to resistance, and there are the early adopters, and then there are the laggards . . . those models exist. In our system, one of the things that we do well, though, is we begin to address things before they are issues.

Similar to Alan, who mentioned challenges related to resistance to change, Leslie (a leader in the nonprofit IDLT space) mentioned that not only is it important to address things before they become issues, but the importance of balancing high-level change "and making sure it's easy for [users] to do." However, this isn't always easy to do; at times, when change is not mandated, and IDLT professionals serve in a more consultancy capacity, according to Michael (higher education), it can leave those newer to the field feeling disheartened:

> "I don't think change happens fast enough, and I think that's probably one of the hardest things for IDs at all levels to understand. So, for example, we have some ID1's that just really struggle with the consultancy piece of working with faculty—when the faculty don't want to adopt their ideas. Look, we know this is better for student learning. Your students are going to like this. We know that. This activity we're proposing, for example, would be a better service for

> the learning outcomes, the kinds of students that you have, the personas that you told us are in this course. And when faculty don't adopt that, that's really disheartening to the designer, especially the more junior IDs, but that's related to the lack of embracing change."
>
> - **Michael (Higher Ed)**

James, a leader in the corporate space, also mentioned change as a challenge for his team and work due to the levels of bureaucracy:

> There's a nimbleness, depending on the size and the architecture of the organization, that can be different. But when you get to a company, like the size and scale of ours, you've established a very big bureaucracy where there are rules for how learning works within a technology sphere and ecosystem.

Similar to James, Michael from the higher education space mentioned bureaucracy, likening change at institutions as being similar to glaciers:

> A friend of mine said there's glaciers, plates, tectonics, and academic affairs, which I love, and I quote a lot because the rate of change is so slow on college campuses. That's by design, right? Higher Ed is so strong because the faculty governance structure is such that it doesn't change . . . you know, whatever you need to tell yourself, but the student needs have changed.

While the slow pace of change to support learning was frustrating to IDLT leaders, they also indicated that it was challenging to find the right fits for their team to do this important work.

Finding the "Right" Fit for Their Team

Leaders also indicated that they had challenges finding the right fit as they hired, maintained, and worked to retain their teams. Jennifer, a K12 leader, mentioned that

sometimes it was hard to find someone for instructional technology roles, and that she had seen administration asking technology-savvy teachers to try out these roles: “The job was posted a really long time . . . and he just thought, hey, you can do this, please try.” Similarly, Andrew (a higher education IDLT leader) mentioned that even though he was able to find qualified candidates, the pool, the clarity of their qualifications, and the competition for good candidates were challenging for hiring managers:

> We just did a search for an instructional designer. We did find qualified candidates, but the pools can be a little challenging. Qualifications can vary quite a bit and where they're coming from. I think we've seen, and I just hired one of these--but K12 teachers who want to make a career change. We know from LinkedIn that this is like a mini-movement of these K12 teachers. They're coming in with varying degrees of preparedness and varying degrees of the ability to speak to it. Now, some are successful, and we just see something there. Maybe given a chance, but I think there's a little bit of getting them there. I think there's also been a little bit of a challenge in terms of us being competitive with the corporate market . . . [who can] offer them a lot more than what we can offer.

Andrew commented that after he had filled his open positions, he was happy with his team but wanted a different composition or skill set to meet current and emerging needs: “I don't want to get rid of anyone on my team. I, but I just wish sometimes the skill set mix was a little different — if I got that through new positions, that would be great, or just over time, if we're able to kind of morph into that.”

When asked what positions they wished they did have but didn’t, Michael (a higher education leader) was clear that he wanted a position that focused on instructional media, among other key ID skills:

> ...the biggest thing we need is what I might call an instructional media designer, or an instructional designer with the media background. I know they exist. They're just harder to find. So, I want someone who's all into video in particular. It would be great if they would have an ID background. I think we have one person that kind of

> does that, but he's still super green and his consultancy skills are not ready yet to do the kinds of things we need. So, that would be the one gaping hole that we have is someone who can help more with pre-production . . . when I say pre-production, I mean scripting, storyboarding, getting people's ideas, turning ideas into something that would be actually engaging--you know, talking someone out of a 75-minute lecture video and then do micro-lectures or using the whiteboard or whatever it might be that actually aligns with an outcome and student need as opposed to, I just want to sprinkle some shiny around my course and that's where we could get, that's where we would need an ID to do that.

Michael went on to share more about how he often brings in individuals to his teams who may not have all the skills needed, but how he works to continue to help them develop the skills needed to be successful in the position:

> "You know, the biggest challenge is developing people's consultancy skills in terms of empathy for IDs. This is related to . . . helping people see a bigger picture so that they have more empathy for other people--that the relationship is the thing about the project that can be the difference between success or failure of an idea, or the timeline of success."
>
> - **Michael (Higher Ed)**

However, as these leaders supported their staff to grow these skills, a few mentioned that retention became an issue as their organizations lacked pathways for advancement to leadership roles. James (a leader in corporate IDLT) spoke to this during his interview:

> Where do people go? I think it's respecting credibility for the work. As you look at elevating people, we have a number of people who have been in the job for 15 to 20 years, and they're at a principal associate level, and we would really like to see them be at the manager level for compensation and for respect purposes. But being a designer alone sometimes to those that work in a multidisciplinary capacity is not

> viewed as being at a manager level because where are they setting strategy? So, elevating the importance of the role without having to sacrifice the core body of work, I think, is a challenge."

While leaders discussed the lack of pathways for advancement within their organizations, some leaders, like Andrew (higher education IDLT leader), remarked on challenges with retaining their IDLT staff due to pay challenges:

> Retention can sometimes be a challenge. We are not the highest-paying institution in the state. We're adjacent to a private college that I believe pays better than we do. So, that's a bit of a challenge. We're also in a market where housing prices are going up quite a bit, and so that ability to kind of keep people and not have them move to corporate and things like that. . . We've lost one or two over the years . . . this is not what I had hoped for.

Benjamin, from the nonprofit sector, also noted some retention challenges, indicating that they had significant turnover and shared that he thought it was due to better opportunities, as well as possible burnout:

> Well, in the last couple of years, the organization had a pretty significant level of turnover, and I think there are a number of factors. When folks leave, typically, they provide very positive reasons for leaving—you know, it's a better opportunity and aren't super critical of the organization. But I would say that ID burnout would make a good study . . . it's that especially during and right after the pandemic—there's just a lot of pressure there, and so we had quite a bit of turnover, but not with our instructional designers, which I think speaks to a couple of things. One is them as individuals and what their interests are. I think the fact that they are a very strong team and just sort of get along well together, despite having over the past couple of years they've had, like, 4 different directors, so there's been quite a bit of change after a pretty consistent, long time with one director."

Small teams spread thin across increasing responsibilities and expectations were common among participants. Relatedly, leaders mentioned that their teams often operated in silos, which may contribute to unrealistic expectations and undervaluing IDLT teams.

Exiting the Silo to Showcase Organizational Value

When asked about the challenges of their team, these leaders often mentioned that their IDLT professionals sometimes struggled being in a silo within their organization, which can make it difficult to showcase the work they were doing and how that work is of value to the organization. Benjamin, a leader in the nonprofit IDLT space, shared that the IDLT team that he works with "kind of does their own thing and is very well respected, but that kind of shields them a little bit from some of the other politics and things that happen at any organization." Benjamin further detailed that the IDLT team does great work but is humble, which has drawbacks:

> ". . . the folks who I'm working with, but I can think of others as well and past experiences, who tend not to be strong self-advocates for the work that they're doing and are just humble people doing their jobs. I think the challenge is wanting to really make visible a lot of the invisible work that IDs do, and that's on leadership. I do think our director does a great job of that, and I try to do so as much as possible. Everyone has a lot of respect for that group, but, you know, they tend not to feel comfortable talking about the great work that they're doing, and I think that has to be acknowledged because it really has a big impact on the organization."
>
> - **Benjamin (Non-Profit)**

Jennifer, a leader in the K12 space, indicated that she had challenges in showcasing the value of what her team does and the connections of technology, teaching, and learning:

> I don't see technology, curriculum, and special education separately, and right now, our leaders in those departments don't see our value. They don't see that

> technology can be the great equalizer--that you can use it as the vehicle to deliver curriculum and instruction for all learners--and how technology can be used to tailor education to fit the needs of the student and to fit the strength of a teacher.

Being humble and seeing these key connections can make it difficult for IDLT leaders and their teams to showcase their value and ideas that could advance teaching, learning, and work at their organization. Michael, a higher education IDLT leader, further described this as intimidation that takes time to grow through and that he and other IDLT professionals "will sometimes struggle with imposter syndrome, and it's a little bit intimidating because I'm not sure that my ideas measure up, but I'm getting better with that, but that takes time."

Discussion

Consistent with Educause (2023), Sanders and Keating (2024), and Torchia (2023), participants in this study mentioned AI as a trend that is impacting the work they do across sectors. Participants acknowledged AI's impact on IDLT work, their organizations, and the broader educational landscape, prompting reflections on its implications for the future of learning and work. They anticipated advancements in current tools (e.g., MS Word, Google, adaptive learning, LMS) powered by AI technology and needing to provide more advanced professional learning on AI while remarking that they were getting burned out on AI, causing a fatigue, with the heavy focus across media platforms, as well as their schools, institutions, and organizations. Beyond AI, similar to Cloud Assess (2024) and Inkling (2024), participants in this interview study discussed technology trends around personalization (e.g., adaptive learning) and AR/VR as tools they were exploring or using to enhance learning experiences, as well as how to move from pilot to scale within their organizations past "pockets of excellence" and into wider quality conversations.

Participants in this study also mentioned non-technology trends that were influencing their work and the work of their teams. Similar to corporate and higher education literature that showcased a focus on microlearning (Cloud Assess, 2024; Educause, 2023; Inkling, 2024), participants in this study shared that they were interested in exploring or actively using microlearning concepts to meet the needs of their learners. More than indicated in the

literature, the participants of this study were also interested in online learning, competency-based learning, and deeper levels of engagement (e.g., creating community — both in courses and professional development applications).

Current literature (Educause, 2023; Muscanell, 2024; Scoppio, 2017; Xie et al., 2021) explored how continuous advancements in teaching, learning, and technology can make it difficult for IDLT professionals to balance staying abreast of trends on top of their growing daily responsibilities. Participants from this study commented that some of their biggest challenges were keeping up with trends while maintaining quality in their day-to-day work with limited resources (e.g., staff, time, and budgets). This manifested itself in workload concerns, similar to Educause's (2024) findings regarding burnout due to increased responsibilities, which was concerning because putting the "right" team together was difficult as the "right" folks were difficult to find and retain—sometimes due to inability to pay or lack of positions to grow and progress into. Participants also shared concerns over complex bureaucracy and resistance (e.g., among users and executive leadership) to new technologies and ways of learning, which made change efforts difficult.

From these findings and reflections, there are a number of implications for different IDLT-related audiences, limitations, and areas for future research to consider.

Implications

From this study, there are a number of considerations for leaders as they work with their IDLT teams, staff-level professionals as they do important IDLT work, and educational programs that train future IDLT professionals.

Leaders who are working with IDLT teams should:

- Identify and transparently communicate pathways for growth for their team members (e.g., entry-level, mid-level, and senior-level positions) within their teams, as well as pathways in the organization, for them to grow to support retention on

their teams.

- Discuss workload with staff members at frequent one-on-one meetings, acting as their partner in understanding their portfolio, analyzing how long aspects of projects take, making space for emerging trend exploration, and collaborating for a realistic workload.

- Be an advocate for their team, showcasing their value across the larger organization and empowering staff through training to learn how to story their success and expertise to stakeholders.

Staff-Level IDLT professionals should:

- Explore emerging trends by identifying learning resources and attending professional development with professional organizations (e.g., EDUCAUSE, Association for Talent Development, Online Learning Consortium, UPCEA, ISTE).

- Be an active participant in their workload, keeping an open and honest dialogue with their supervisor about their portfolio and if they are feeling burned out.

- Seek opportunities to lead projects for the team and organization, leaning into their strengths while growing their skills and learning to tell the story of their knowledge, skills, abilities, expertise, and successes across their organization and to potential employers.

Educational programs that are training future IDLT professionals should:

- Integrate content that supports students in not only learning about AI tools and practices but also develop activities that have students critically apply these tools and practices to assist them in the work they will be doing in the field (e.g., designing and facilitating learning experiences; selecting emerging learning

technologies for their schools, institutions, and organizations).

- Provide instruction on emerging broader learning shifts (e.g., microlearning, competency-based education, creating community in learning, attending to learner mental health, inclusive learning experiences that focus on belonging).

- Prepare students on how to lead and support change management efforts from different lenses (mandated vs. voluntary change or adoption), as well as how to showcase the story of their value to their teams and beyond (e.g., schools, institutions, organizations, and the field).

Conclusion

As instructional design and learning technology professionals, we are navigating a dynamic landscape filled with both challenges and opportunities. The findings from this study—such as the rise of artificial intelligence, the growing focus on personalized and inclusive learning, and the persistent need to manage workload and change—underscore the evolving nature of our work and the importance of staying adaptable as we design and deliver high-quality learning experiences.

This moment encourages thoughtful reflection on how to address emerging trends while balancing innovation with the practical realities of our roles. While trends continue to evolve, this study provides a foundation and underscores the need for ongoing research to support the work we do every day. Future studies might delve further into emerging challenges and opportunities, expand data collection to include more diverse voices, and explore critical areas such as AI (e.g., addressing fatigue, effective applications, and support models), microcredentialing, and strategies for managing workload and mitigating burnout.

Together, as a community, we have the capacity to shape the future of our field. By addressing these challenges and opportunities with care and purpose, we can continue to support learners and organizations in achieving their goals in an ever-changing world.

Declarations

The authors indicate no conflicts of interest in this research.

The authors assert that approval was obtained from the Internal Review Board (IRB) at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater.

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