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- S1 00:00 Two, one. Hello and welcome to another episode of the Moxie Podcast. This is episode 35, recorded on the 7th of April 2016, though the Moxie Session this episode relates to was held in September 2015, in Wellington. This is the companion web show to the Moxie Sessions, an internet economy discussion group held once a month. The Moxie Sessions bring together a small group of business thinkers to discuss how New Zealand can take advantage of the internet, and particularly to boost its national competitiveness. I'm Andrew Patterson, with you here in Auckland, I'll introduce our guest panel shortly. But first let me tell you a bit about our topic under discussion. Lots of famous tech company founders were not terribly interested in getting an education, at a time when an increasing number of high school students are beginning to question the value of a tertiary education and a growing number of online teaching options are available to them, is it still an important step in the path towards gaining employment particularly in the tech sector? Or should you lock yourself in a darkened room, boil up some two minute noodles and work through the night on your coding, seeking to become the next Mark Zuckerberg.
- S1 01:10 Joining me to discuss this, Professor Mark Hickford is the Pro-Vice Chancellor and Dean of Law at Victoria of University in Wellington. He's held a range of senior legal and management roles in both the private and public sectors. Mandy McGirr is a PhD candidate at Victoria University looking at ways to improve education to employment transitions especially for vocational and at risk youth sub groups. And finally Rohan Wakefield is co-founder of Enspiral Dev Academy, an intensive training group for software developers that started in Wellington, is now spreading around the country. Welcome to you all.
- S2 01:48 Hi there.
- S3 01:49 Thank you--
- S4 01:48 Thank you.
- S1 01:49 I get asked from time to time to speak to high school students about business and particularly business careers. And what I've noticed over the last couple of years are the number of students who ask me if I think it's still necessary to go to university. Mark Hickford, do you think university is increasing or decreasing? I guess a university education, increasing or decreasing in value when you consider the speed of change in the world right now. And I realise that's somewhat of a challenging question for someone employed by a University.
- S3 02:18 Well I think it actually does assist. I wouldn't want to say that it's the only path or the exclusive path, but it certainly a useful part of a suite of ways of preparing for such a career. There are a number of examples counter to the ones you've introduced which essentially demonstrate that fact. But having said that we certainly wouldn't want to insist there's only one path to go.
- S1 02:50 Mandy McGirr, you've discovered I guess particularly this idea that students are weighing up university and tertiary education options in general. What's your research looking at specifically in terms of perhaps how that landscape is changing?
- S4 03:07 Well what I'm really focused on it, what matters to help you become to more employable. And I think in terms of the relevance, we could really talk about the relevance of tertiary education, in terms of deliver models, and also what is taught, and how that's relevant or not relevant to what's needed to becoming employable. And whether we're talking about youth who get classified as at risk, or youth who go on to university, or all different subgroups of youth, it's actually the same question. So I'm interested in how tertiary education, and secondary education, might be more relevant to preparing people for employment. And two things I'm really noticing standing out, is employers screaming out for, what's being called different things, but basically soft skills or non-cognitive skills, and the importance or work experience, or getting opportunities to have some practical experience.
- S1 04:10 Let's come back to that. And Rohan Wakefield, you've developed a, I guess what might be considered a hybrid model of tertiary education, particularly for the tech sector. Tell us a bit about your motivation for establishing the Enspiral, or Enspiral, which one do you prefer?
- S2 04:26 Yeah, Enspiral Dev Academy is what we say.

- S1 04:29 Okay.
- S2 04:29 So I supposed our business has grown out of a pain that we were realising in the market. Enspiral itself was seeing a lot of folks knocking on the door expecting to be able to get work and just not having those skills. Mandy mentioned them before. Those sort of soft skills, those skills that I really tend to call commonsense. Being able to communicate, empathise, being self aware. But also again, those real life experiences need to be there, even before you set yourself in a commercial environment. Either exposure to how business is done, or some form of apprenticeship, or at least something there that puts your feet on the ground, and with the view that you understand what you're getting yourself in to commercially, and with some info into how the world works. It is interesting to think of different education providers and how we are meeting that need. We certainly don't think of ourselves as a straight education provider, we're more a setting people up to move careers. So we are looking at the sector, the tech sector in particular in this case, understanding the skills that those hiring managers and HR folk need, incorporating that into an environment, that is effectively an apprenticeship, in house, and giving people the knowledge and tools that they need to get a job, but also giving them the place and the experience to develop their soft skills, so that they can step in to a commercial environment and hit the ground running.
- S1 06:03 Mark Hickford, obviously universities are under a lot of pressure at the moment, because the very nature of university itself, and the university experience, is having to change. How are they adapting to this new world order, where employers perhaps as our other two panelists have pointed out, are focusing much more perhaps on skills than they are on knowledge.
- S3 06:27 So I think some of these trends have effectively been implicit in some of the-- what one might call the more professional aspects of tertiary education. So those that are seen as precursors to professional vocations, but not necessarily completely so. But which I mean that some of the schools for instance in the law school environment that you pick up, aren't necessarily are going to just lead one to a straight legal practice career. They may take you through some government, or commercial aspects of the private sector, for example. And for preparation for that law schools for many years have actually had, in effect, outreach engagements with the professions, in a sense of internships and clerkships. Including for instance, at some levels, access to the judiciary, which has grown over the last 20 years or so. So there's been a degree of continuity in the past in that sense, but at the same time a focus on perhaps broadening the reach of those, which we've noticed with, for instance, larger opportunities developing in some sectors of the economy for internships through the course of the degree, which then it tends to allow those persons to become socialised with the sorts of skills that Mandy is talking about, and Rohan is talking about as well. Because I agree completely with them that that's the sort of skill base that's incredibly important to have in addition to the types of formal educational qualifications that a tertiary institution like a university might supply. So in effect, some of those trends have actually been underway for a little time, and if you go back further in time, and you look at say a law degree in the 1960s, it was very common for instance, for those doing law degrees, to be apprentice to practices at the time they were doing them. With the explosion in numbers what tends to happen is that we look at different ways of ensuring that our student bodies access some of those internship experiences, as well as other skill based forms of interaction, such as mentoring, advocacy generally, and also negotiation skills. So generally schools, such as ours, are looking at those sorts of adaptations.
- S1 08:51 Yes, I mean probably the law schools are a good example of faculties that have been doing this quite well probably for a while, just by virtue of the way they've worked. But if I think across the wider university landscape I'm not sure whether or not some of those situations apply.
- S3 09:08 So that's an area that is definitely a focus point for tertiary institutions in other degree areas, ways in which for instance, we may better engage with specific institutions or specific communities for want of a better term, essentially the communities in which we find ourselves, and which our students find ourselves. So that's an increasing focal point for university education specialists as well.
- S1 09:34 Mandy McGirr, in your research you've looked at this idea of education to employment transitions, particularly for at risk youth subgroups, and we know for instance the drop out rates amongst Maori and Pacifica students in their first year is something like 40%, I mean how well are we actually managing, not only the process from university to work, but also from school into university as well?
- S4 10:05 In terms of from school into university, that's what you said was it?
- S1 10:09 Mm.
- S4 10:10 School to university. I think we do better at mapping out some career pathway and study options than others. We still have a big problem with there being a divide, and it's kind of a class divide, and a perception divide about vocational versus academic pathways, and I find that that's actually causing a lot of damage, and stopping us from progressing. And a lot of where you'll find skills shortages, is often where there is a need for a combination of, or an overlap between vocational and academic knowledge and skills. So in terms of mapping out other pathways, besides the traditional going from secondary school doing your traditional academic subjects, and into a traditional academic career path, sorry, training pathway in a university, we really need to look at how we deliver careers advice and guidance partly in secondary schools - but that's a collective question, not just one for careers advisors. Because really the only pathways that seem to be super clear are doing those traditional

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academic subjects in secondary school, and going in to university, and enrolling in the programs that you've heard of before - you know, your English Lit, and your maybe Psychology if your lucky, but it's often students don't even know what options are out there, and they don't know even what terms to look for.

- S1 11:57 I did read a piece recently where somebody suggested we should get rid of the term career altogether, because the concept of a career for your people today really isn't going to exist, is it?
- S4 12:10 Absolutely. I mean while it may be more clearly mapped out as a career pathway for some more than others, certain industries, the health sector for example, and the medical profession as an example, law as a sort of an example - but actually you can go lots of ways with law. I like to think of it as more training people how to play hopscotch, rather than thinking that there's going to be one clearly mapped out pathway, it's learning the skill of how to set short term and long term goals and directions, so that you're always aiming in a general direction, but you are playing a bit of hopscotch. You might be going sideways in to something to get experience, or find out that you actually interested in something that you didn't know about [chuckles].
- S1 12:57 Yeah, which is a really good point about the way that-- they use this concept about being agile now, isn't it? Which is the ability to move with the market as those shifting sands are forever changing.
- S4 13:13 Absolutely. And again, going back to those soft skills or non-cognitive skills, sometimes referred to as transferrable skills, because they are there interpersonal skills and self management skills, team work and problem solving skills. Those are things that are relevant as life skills as much as work skills, right? Investing in developing those skills in people is not just preparing them to be foot soldiers for one particular industry or employer, it's actually helping the individual to become agile. So I think it's a better return on investment in some ways, to really focus on those transferrable soft skills, than to focus too much, or put too much emphasis on particular subject knowledge, being the thing that we produce or develop through the education system.
- S1 14:09 Rohan Wakefield, is that the approach that you're taking at Enspiral? You're really trying to develop a very multi-skilled, multifaceted approach to the way you're delivering content?
- S2 14:20 Yeah, definitely. I mean we're very focused on that. But we do that because industry is looking to that. We sit down with our industry partners, our colleagues, and say, "When you are looking at candidates, think about the most exceptional candidate you've got at the moment, tell me about them and why." And it comes down with their versatility, their ability to understand people, their ability to step into situations and act accordingly with exceptional judgement, to have the trust of that person that they can solve problems on the fly in a number of different ways. And they can't-- they are not just a one trick pony. I also think, particularly in entrepreneurship and tech, you have to constantly learn and change. It's not just a case of learn something and then go out and replicate that for your career. Now accountants, and medicine, effectively you can do some of this. Obviously both of those areas do progress, and there is research in both of those areas and practices change. But in tech and entrepreneurship, this is a monthly thing. To give you an example, our curriculum changes every week. We talk to industry, we incorporate aspects that are being practiced in industry, so what we are training is up to date. We're also thinking about the skills that people walk out of the door here. Funnily enough, right down on the list is code, I mean it's a "Give me", you've got to have it. But there are definitely more favourable traits that our candidates come out with that industry is looking for. First and foremost it's a deep passion for obviously being in tech, but there's a big one there around empathy and self awareness. So being able to understand that, "I am a person, and I am good at somethings and I'm working on others, but there are other people that are struggling in their own way, but I will have to work for them, because the company that is hiring me is invested in all of us to be efficient and generate a product." Now these are kind of commonsense type aspects that people get no training in, unless they work heavily with each other, unless they actually understand themselves, and you've got the ability to self express. It's actually quite subtle, it's quite difficult to provide these environments in our current system. So we are really trying to push that at a tertiary level, at a career changer level, and we often get people sitting down saying, "I never expected to have such a life changing experience on a code camp. I mean I expected to be able to code at the end of this, but now I'm really feel capable in being myself, and stepping in to a commercial environment and really providing value.
- S1 16:51 It's a really good approach that idea of exceptional candidates and what makes them up. I guess that you don't get many employers that will say to you that such and such is a really great candidate because they had the best grades out of university?
- S2 17:05 Sure. Yeah, sure. We don't have grades here. However, something to bare in mind, and when you were talking earlier in the conversation, I made a mental note, we are dealing with predominately post graduate folks here, these folk have degrees in other areas. We do have a good number of people that don't have a degree, and have careers behind them, but predominantly we are taking on people with pretty good experiences in themselves. Now that's interesting because I think universities, obviously they are the essence and the heart of our education system, they're not going away, and I think one incredibly important value that is really relevant is just the time to grow up. Time to be with your peers, experiencing life, having conversations that are diverse and dispersed and so on, and that's a really big part of it. And I think that's where a lot of the soft skills can come from. What we are really advocating for, let's change what happens on the theoretical side, let's change how

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we deliver education. Because all of those soft skills are actually coming from the community outside of the institutions, I mean there's a little bit of crossover there, but we think the actual delivery, the theory, the curriculums, and so on, can change hugely to benefit those candidates, and I suppose that's where we sit. But there is definitely a huge difference between something like law, medicine, and business and tech that move so fast, and you need to have such a diverse range of skills really to even just scrap the surface of things.

- S1 18:38 Mark Hickford, this is an interesting point isn't it, about content? I was talking to somebody recently, one of the founders of Singularity University in San Francisco, and they made the same point, that their material, their teaching material, is being updated every couple of weeks, indicative of the speed of change in the world that we're working with, but increasingly how do you think universities are adapting to this new world order, which is really putting them under a lot of pressure, isn't it?
- S3 19:09 Well I think the general focus, if I can [fulfil?] it, and this is rather crude of course, is that focus on teaching the different ways in which people might become comfortable with ambiguity. And to not be driven or in anyway predetermined by content, but to see the content as part of a diverse set of ways of seeing that challenge, how one might presuppose an issue needs to be resolved or dealt with. That essentially aligns, if I'm hearing Rohan correctly, very much with the sorts of skills I think are very useful, certainly in my own personal background, I've found them incredibly useful, such as the content itself has some value, obviously, but that actual key attributes you're looking for are the ways in which you approach complex issues. The sort of attitude that one takes to those issues, and also the preparation to be effectively challenged, or undermined in ones comfort levels. So these are important skills that one has to adapt to as well as the technical professional in any particular field. And certainly with a skill base, such as the legal one, or in humanities for instance, these are some of the important insights that ought to be part of that sort of education.
- S1 20:38 All right, just with that--
- S3 20:38 Because they are equipping you for a variety of experiences in the future.
- S1 20:42 Sure. Just with the remaining minutes, I thought I might get you all perhaps look in to your crystal ball, and make some predictions within your respective areas, about where things might be moving to in the next five to ten years. Mandy McGirr, if we could start with you, what might you be bold enough to project that we might be thinking a lot more about in the future than perhaps we are now, or where this whole space is going to move in to/
- S4 21:09 Well if I could be optimistic and hopeful [chuckles], I would say where I would like to see it going, is the [?] formal tertiary and secondary education systems, are incentivised to focus on being a facilitator of practical experiences and of soft skill development as an ongoing process, rather than focusing on traditional test grades or academic subjects as success indicators of preparing people for employment. So that's my where I intend to encourage the secondary and tertiary school systems to go. Whether that happens is a different question.
- S1 21:59 Yes. Good point. Rohan Wakefield.
- S2 22:02 Yeah, I suppose my comment sits very closely with those technologies that are emerging and that do move fast. So the way I see it, I see universities are too slow to deliver those at a high level. I think similarly as to the journalism and news sector, we are going to see dramatic change, and I see those people not adapting will be out performed and out classed. I think the use of the internet now, to deliver these types of curriculum on mass is a big catalyst. But I also see the demand, both from industry, and from individuals hugely changing. There are people filling those gaps, we're one of them, and I think that will increase, and we're keeping a very close eye on other areas in which we can fill gaps into, and I know that the likes of, you know, some of the leaders in this area out of the States are heavily investing in other areas around business, design, obviously entrepreneurship, as well as tech.
- S1 23:13 Indeed. And Professor Mark Hickford, final word to you.
- S3 23:15 Well I would probably not be too far off either what Rohan said, or what Mandy said.
- S1 23:22 All right [chuckles]. We'll take--
- S3 23:24 That's [gravity?] for you.
- S1 23:25 Yeah. We'll take that as a tick of endorsement as well too. Thank you all for joining us. Professor Mark Hickford: Pro Vice Chancellor and Dean of Law at Victoria University in Wellington. Mandy McGirr: PHD Candidate, also at Victoria University, looking at ways to improve education to employment transitions. And Rohan Wakefield: the co-founder of Enspiral Dev Academy, also Wellington based. Thank you all for joining us, and thank you for listening to this podcast for Moxie Session number 35. We hope you'll join us again for another Moxie Podcast at some point in the future. I'm Andrew Patterson, thanks

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for joining us. All right.