From Classroom to Code: The Impact of AI on Learning and Development with Luis Garcia

00:02.346-00:17.337 Announcer: You're listening to the HR Mixtape. Your podcast with the perfect mix of practical advice, thought provoking interviews, and stories that just hit different so that work doesn't have to feel, well, like work. Now, your host, Shari Simpson.
00:17.718-00:37.436 Shari Simpson: Joining me today is Luis Garcia, president and co-founder of PETE. With over 25 years of experience in digital education and ed tech, Luis is transforming workforce training through AI powered learning. He's known for scaling startups, driving results, and being a respected voice in AI innovation. Luis is helping shape the future of how we learn and work.
00:41.381-00:44.144 Shari Simpson: Luis, thank you so much for jumping on the podcast with me today.
00:44.164-00:45.926 Luis Gracia: Thank you. Thank you for having me.
00:46.638-01:08.138 Shari Simpson: So I just got back from the Transform conference out in California and AI is still like one of the hottest topics in HR. And so I was so glad that we were able to connect and we're going to talk about AI. And I'd love if you could maybe set the stage by telling us a little bit about your journey and your passion in the AI space.
01:08.658-06:37.086 Luis Gracia: Thank you so much and so I have a long journey with AI as it turned out. Well, you know, AI has been around for 50 years and so and folks that. He sees that it is in the news every single day and it's become kind of a household name. But it's been around for a very long time. And so my first encounter with AI was in college in the early 90s. And as I took an artificial intelligence a course back in 1993 or something like that. And then when I joined the workforce, it was as a software engineer, which is just a tool that, you know, in the early years was more about you creating your own AI machines to solve particular problems, find patterns, or try to do better predictions. And then I evolved more into an executive and things like that, so I've been watching more form of art than as an engineer. But at some point in my career, I got into education almost accidentally and was hired by a university to create an online university. And so at the time, I wasn't really a learning executive. I was just a technology exec. So I did what software engineers do and do a pilot and try to collect data and just try to understand what this learning thing was. the a couple of years of pilots and then I designed a software, a software, you know, learning management system early 2000s I'm speaking about now and because I didn't really like the options back then. And so we we we built it and then I end up spearheading the effort for the university, which tripled the size of the university. And we went in a couple of years, we have 5000 degree seeking students. And then a couple of years later, we had 12,000 degree seeking students. And I had 1000 employees on their meeting. And it was a great, great effort and example of hyper growth and hiring people. But I became very familiar with the challenges of creating digital learning. And and even for

workforce learning, because when you grow very fast, then you have to have an effort to onboard people and train them in that you are launching degree programs, you know, five or six a year. So you can train people how to think about that. So so that two problems bubble to the top. And the first one was was how do you create training materials for training experiences in a sense? This is really hard to do. But folks don't understand if you're in a classroom with an expert in front of you, and that expert is a good communicator, then you feel very good, you feel educated. But the moment you remove that expert, those PowerPoints in the background that no one's paying attention to, those become the teacher. And so creating materials for effective training is a very big deal. And in workforce learning, unless you're a company with a lot of resources that can hire a learning department with instructional designers and all that, you basically get boxed out of that. You are down to using your experts as trainers, getting them out of their jobs. So that's problem number one. Problem number two, with existing all learning, regardless of the workforce or traditional, is that how do you do evaluation of learning in digital learning at scale? And tests are a terrible way to actually evaluate learning, but it's the best that we have that it will be effective and scalable. In the digital world, even better, because you just can think of things and it can be automatically But really, unless you ask the questions correctly, you have really no way to personalize the evaluation, which is the most effective way to do evaluation. So those are the two problems that we want to solve. And when Genentech AI came to be, and my partner, who had been in another tech startup and had very, very successful, it was a unicorn, exited from that, he had gone through the same problem of high growth and having to train people and seeing you know, very closely how hard it was. And in his own words, I thought it was going to be a couple hundred hours, and they end up being thousands of hours. And at the time I had left my job at the university, I was working with startups. So we had launched and said, do you think we can use Genentech AI to solve this problem? And I said, yes. Because when it became available, it became very clear that you can use the power of creating content was there. But I was most excited about how can we use a vectorized knowledge base to create an experience that will act as if the expert is asking you questions and analyzing the answers against learning outcomes. And we built both. 06:39.005-07:32.991 Shari Simpson: Well, it's so, it's so fascinating because it's near and dear to my heart. I'm actually working on my doctorate and the research that I want to get into has to do with adaptive learning models in the digital space, which is right up your alley and everything that you're talking about and everything that I'm seeing and hearing in that learning and development space when we're thinking about AI. You nailed it in that there's still this group that has to do a lot of creation on their own. So having these tools in place is amazing. They don't just have to go to YouTube and find a video, right? They can create this training themselves. So I love that. But then the level up to it where you're thinking about these personalized journeys and these conversations with AI that can really

push you forward, that's where it's going. How do you see that? kind of blowing up the way that we think about learning and development right now.

07:33.631-09:36.396 Luis Gracia: You know, it's interesting because in learning, you know, unless you're really, really into it, you know, talking about evaluation of learning, or we call it assessment, and it's a very hot conversation that has been happening for a very long time, but not a lot of good solutions for it, because the solutions are never very scalable. But unless you're in it, you never really think about that. And you really, really think about how do I create the content so people can take it and I can cross off my list. And so for the customers that we that we target, which are, you know, between 50 to 500 employees, And without a learning department and without people to think about that, it's so interesting when we tell them, it's like, yeah, well, we can do the content. That's fine. And I actually think that's going to be ubiquitous for learning management systems in the future. And I said, but have you thought about the fact that you don't know if they actually learn? And more importantly, sometimes their solutions about shadowing and things, you know, it can be effective for certain things, but when you're doing shadowing, you know, you pick up the good practices and the bad practices too. So it's a propagation of practices and good and bad. And so how do you make sure that that is effective? And then they get really excited about that. They say, oh, I could use that for, you know, in customer service to train the reps on how to deescalate a call. You know, and we have a bank that use them to be trained and practice on cases that are not very common and that come to your window. Or a stadium uses it to train the people that work on the event day to tackle certain situations. And it's conversational. And always having a conversation with you is evaluating your answers against the learning outcomes of the experience. So I think it's a very critical thing to have. And there has been no other technology in the past that will allow you to do that.

09:36.676-10:34.333 Shari Simpson: Well, it's exciting to hear what you're working on. How do you see AI changing other areas? So from the evaluation perspective, I love that. You know, it does bring up the question in my head, though, as you think about some of these conversations we're having around knowledge, right? I'm glad that you mentioned kind of being in the 90s, because I showed this before being in college in the late 90s. And I remember when that transition from you know, your card catalog in the library to using, you know, Google to search something. And I remember professors being at the time being like, well, you got to remember how to use the library card catalog, like it's not going away. And like all this fear of what Google was going to do is going to make us dumb, right? It wasn't going to help us. I think we're kind of having that same sort of debate if we think that AI is going to make a stump. I don't think it is. What are you seeing in the work that you're doing and the connections you're making there?

10:35.373-14:41.828 Luis Gracia: Well, I mean, historically,

technology wins. And it doesn't matter how much people, I always give the examples like I remember a time in which teachers were not allowed a calculator in the classroom. So this is a debate that has been taking place for a very long time. And then it was the computer. And then it was, as you say, searching on the Internet. And technology always wins. And so my message to teachers is and always is embrace it, take it, take your curriculum to the next level because of it, because it's not going away. Once it's adopted, the learners will push you through it. And so you have no choice but to use it. And so you may as well be part of it. In terms of how it's affecting areas, affecting all areas, I think that when I talk to business owners, I encourage them to have a serious conversation about where AI can be applied to your business. Because if you're not doing your competition, And it comes down to the individual also. How do you use it yourself? Because whatever it is that you do, if you're not using it, somebody else that does what you do is using it and will have an edge already. So don't fight the calculator, you know? Now, having said that, I do think that there are areas that are, you know, specifically when we talk about human resources, that is going to be very critical for it. I actually believe that today hiring is broken and that technology broke hiring altogether. And I am conducting first interviews for people I hire through AI, and AI is doing the first interview. Very soon, people are going to be sending their own avatars to have their first conversation with AI, and it's going to be ruined all over again. So that part I think that we're going through a troublesome time and that instead of making hiring easier, technology has made hiring more difficult for everyone, for the applicant, for the employer. And if you wanted to expect better matching, it's actually making it worse because people can We have bots now that can rewrite your resume to match the job description. So basically, everybody has the perfect job description, the perfect resume. And none of that is helping. And so we have to, this is an area that I think it has to be rethought. And my answer to people today is get out of your house and go meet people like the way we used to do in the 90s. And because it's also bad for the employer, I don't want to, I mean, I opened a position the other day, I got 200 applicants in two hours. I can't, I can't read that. And obviously, when I brought a bot that will, you know, do the work for me, but then there is like somebody turns around, it's like, how about this guy? I'm like, oh, yeah, sure. Everybody else out there doing that. I look at this one because at least I have some kind of endorsement. Yeah. And so so there are areas in which AI is not going to help. It's going to make things worse. And the content on the Internet is, you know, multiplying scales that we had never seen with a lot of, you know, random thoughts with no essence. And so we're going to have to get over that. But it always gets to a control place where we then can take it to the next level. I do think that the net value will be way higher. I actually think the generative AI becomes the most transformative technology in my lifetime. And that's a hard thing to say, because I've seen the transistor, I've seen the personal

computer, I've seen the internet, I've seen social media, the smartphone, and all of these technologies are transformative. And I do think generative AI is more than all of those put together.

14:42.622-15:10.013 Shari Simpson: Yeah, I actually couldn't agree more with that. I think it's going to be fascinating to see what happens in the next, you know, 12 months, not even five years, right? Everything's moving so quickly. What do you say to the person who's listening, who's like, yeah, okay, I've heard about AI. I love it. I want to get into it. I don't even know where to start. Like, personally or professionally, what are maybe some tools that you have used or you've recommended to help people kind of get their feet wet with it?

15:10.745-17:39.584 Luis Gracia: Yeah, that's a great question. And I actually encourage everyone to do it. And there, you know, if you asked me this question two years ago, it would have been a little different. Today, there's a lot of tools. But, you know, the most famous is chatGPT by OpenAI. You can go to chatGPT or openai.com, and they have several options there. And then create an account. And for free, you can do a lot. And then just don't even apply it to your job. Be curious about what else it can do. I usually do demonstrations, but I get a piece of an article, put it in there, and I start telling the agent to say, you know, this piece of news, let's write a different headline. And let's make it very dramatic. Or let's write it in half the words. Or now make this piece of news as if it was the opening of a movie. And I now do this like it was a telenovela, you know, and then having fun with it is it's not threatening anybody's job unless you're a writer for telenovelas. But but but then then then you start getting familiar. Oh, if I could do this, maybe I could do that for my job. And so so that's the way I got started is just by playing with it. And the next step, if I being so bold, is like get a subscription and And the engine is a lot better when you get a subscription for JGPT or for Claude from Anthropic or Perplexity is one that a lot of people like because it gives you citations and things like that. But when you pay the subscription, you kind of force yourself. You're paying now, so you force yourself to use it. And so that's what I did to myself. Like, I just kind of get the subscription to force myself to use it every day. And I had never looked back. I think it's the first 20 bucks, the best 20 bucks that I spent every month. And because the amount of things that allows me to do, it just made me. it multiplied me because I can do work so much faster. And so that's what I would recommend for everybody to do. You can go for JGPT, you can go with Claude by Perplexity. There are also, if you're not into text and you want to do images, then there are a lot of options for image generation now that are a ton of fun to work with. And I just think that the text use case is a lot more interesting because it allows you to do a lot more exploration.

17:40.006-18:50.733 Shari Simpson: I don't typically use tools like ChatGPT to be a legal reference. That being said, one of the things that I do find it very helpful is if you want to learn a new concept or you want to learn about some case law that exists in the HR space,

it is a really good place to kind of have that conversation and not feel like you're going to get judged for asking questions because you're not doing it to an employment lawyer or you know, to your CEO, you're just having this conversation. It was funny, my husband's a fireman and he had a union question the other day. And I was like, hey, you know, I haven't looked at that in a while. And kind of went down this whole rabbit hole for, I don't know, 20, 30 minutes, just going back and forth and saying, tell me how that applies to this. And, you know, how would I, if this was the scenario, does do both laws apply or does only one law apply? And it was really informative and talk about You know, the amount of knowledge that I could get in that 20 minute conversation that before would have taken me a bunch of Google searches, a bunch of weird trying to connect the dots. And it's doing all that work for me. So that multiply factor, that's huge.
18:51.174-19:27.681 Luis Gracia: It's huge. That's another great way to interact with it. I have a friend that calls them jams. literally schedule half hour of their time to do a jam with a LLM, and to tackle a particular issue that you would like to have a conversation with somebody with. It's like, how should I approach this? If I were to create a report about X, Y, and Z, how would I start? What would be the components of it? And then it just helps you think.
19:29.420-19:53.352 Shari Simpson: Yeah, it's like mind mapping and I don't know, I don't want to make a bad reference, but it's definitely leveled up for sure. As we wrap up our conversation, what is kind of the one thing that you want to leave our audience with from, you know, thinking about AI and its impact to learning and development and HR as a whole? I think you have a really unique perspective. What do you want to leave with our audience?
19:53.959-20:42.922 Luis Gracia: Yeah, so I love coming to HR podcasts because we talk to a lot of HR leaders. And I don't know why at some point someone decided that the leader of HR somehow is a learning expert, and then charged them to do the training for the company. And so we talked to a lot of HR leaders that, you know, they throw the ball into the court and they don't know what to do. But if you're in a smaller company, then please call us and let us be your platform for learning that requires no instructional designers to help your expert create courses and get back to the job. And so if this is something that resonates, then go to our website and pete.com, that's a very easy domain, p-e-t-e.com, slash podcast, so I know it came from you.
20:43.595-20:48.941 Shari Simpson: Yeah, I love that. This has been a great conversation. Thank you so much for taking a few minutes of your day to chat with me.
20:49.481-20:50.002 Luis Gracia: Thank you, Sari.