

National Institute of Corrections Virtual Conference 2016 Transcript for Interview with Clark Quinn

Announcer: This is the podcast of the National Institute of Corrections Virtual Conference. Please join us November 9, 2016 for our third annual conference titled Leading with Innovation, where you will receive a full day of presentations, innovative chats, and networking all brought to you by NIC. Visit us at www.nicic.gov/go/VC2016 to register.

And now... here's a sneak peek!

National Institute of Corrections: Sort of give us some kind of background to how what you do is connected to corrections and NIC.

Clark Quinn: Sure, Donna. The theme of this year's conference, the virtual conference for Institute of Corrections, is innovation. And Leslie had heard me talk before of pushing how organizations could and should be moving to become more nimble, more agile as things move faster. And my background, I saw the connections between computers and learning as an undergraduate and of designing my own nature, and that's been my career ever since.

And it started with just learning, which is part of...and this need for change, because if we need new skills as part of this change, we develop learning solutions. And I went deep into what is learning and how do we make change? And began to realize that it's not always just about courses. There are ways to support people performing better and differently without necessarily using courses, and then there are times when the best way to develop ability comes from people interacting together.

And as I saw this bigger picture, I saw how both organizations weren't necessarily taking advantage of it, and how technology could facilitate it. That's been something I've been fascinated with, and I've looked at "How do people think? How do people perform? How do people design? How do we change things to match the way we think, work, and learn?" And that mindset and the elements that go into it I think is what made it

seem like my...what I have to say would be relevant for the Institute of Corrections, apparently, particularly at this point in time where there's a significant amount of change happening in the correctional institute...institute in the field of corrections, changes in how these things are managed, and the need to beginning to adapt. That was my understanding of why I'm here.

NIC: Okay, great. Now in your introduction, you mentioned that your curiosity for innovation really started back in your college days. Is that correct?

Quinn: Well, my curiosity about learning and technology began in my college days. My interest in innovation...it's somewhat complicated, but I got very interested in what's called metacognition. How do we learn to learn? How do we think about our own thinking, and therefore improve it? And that actually ends up being about cycles of review and refinement and reflection and experimentation, which ends up being critical not just to individual development, but to organizational development. So there was a strong overlap that became clear to me starting more in grad school; I went back to get a PhD in what was effectively applied cognitive science. My first job out of college was designing and programming educational computer games. And I realized we didn't know enough about how to design them. So I'm back to grad school and started looking at cognition, and it's there that I start seeing this metacognition and got really interested in it.

And it was post that...and I started as an academic and then in 2001...well, 1998, I went and joined an organization that was beginning to develop lifelong learning. And that was the sort of genesis of my looking at organizations needing solutions. And begun to start mapping that whole notion of metacognition and processes to support development to organizations, not just individuals.

NIC: Okay, so then how did you move from your job post-grad school to Quinnovation? How did Quinnovation come about?

Quinn: I've been applying my skills within organizations for their clients. And quite literally, in 2001, a lot of things went up; I was working for what was essentially a startup at the time, and it evaporated like so much else. A "consultant" was a euphemism for "unemployed" at the time, but fortunately, it came to be a way of life. People found out about me and started bringing me. And Quinnovation emerged as a base for me to working for clients.

As part of that, I came up with a book about how do you design games for learning? Which was just a recurring themes starting with that first job out of college. Second book was mobile learning, because I had gotten involved in that. And that really was a catalyst because if you look at how people use their smartphones to help themselves perform better or even their cellphones, you ask, "What do you do?" And they talk about, "Oh, I use the calendar to store events, and I use Twitter or WhatsApp or whatever to connect with colleagues and friends. I use Google search. I use the maps to navigate. I snap pictures of my parking spot at the airport so I don't forget where I parked."

And you get this huge sweet (?) and swell of things that people are using these for that have nothing to do with courses. And that really was an inflection point where I realized that people are doing lots of things to use technology to make themselves smarter that have nothing to do with courses, and that was an [inaudible 00:08:05] to thinking about how organizations might do it. I had known that organizations needed to do this, to start looking at the richer suite of how we can help people perform, and what happened then was this let mobile be a channel for that. But it also got me thinking more and more about it, which led to my most recent book, which is about revolutionized learning and development. Which is talking about at looking and creating a performance ecosystem to support both the optimal execution that has to happen; all those things we know we need to do like optimally executing procedures and policies.

But that's no longer sufficient. Things are changing fast enough that we still have to have agility. And that comes from continual innovation. And that recognition that we need to couple these two things together and find a way to do it that doesn't keep...detract from our execution of what we know we need to do, but gives us the ability to new situations and continually improve, was the realization that came sort of through that period of 2001 to 2014 when the book came about, and doesn't mean they haven't been continuing to learn about it. It's just that was sort of the catalyst of the thinking we're talking about.

NIC: Okay. From the work that you did with your previous employers, you developed Quinnovation. I suppose, as you said, so the company sort of folded, and you were able to continue to work with organizations, and then you subsequently published several books.

What is not clear to me is, specifically, what you do for those

companies. How does your consultation work?

Quinn: Two things. One is...I've, in many ways, been working in two levels. In some ways, I've been an advocate for better learning design. We're not doing good enough learning design. So I work with organizations to redesign their learning design processes. I don't redo their courses. What I do is help them develop the ability to do their courses better.

And then, a second level with organizations, what I do is help them think about "How do I start moving from the state of just offering courses to the state of being supporting both that optimal execution and that continuing innovation through a performance ecosystem? How do we map there?"

In both cases, however, how I work with organizations is the first thing I do is I want a lot of background. I want to understand them, what they're doing, how they're working, what their barriers are, what's working well. So do a lot of information gathering beforehand. Once we agree to engage, my first role...I need to understand where you're at, and where you need to be, and where you want to be, and what your beliefs are, where your thinking is.

And then, what has been a reliable pattern across [inaudible 00:11:30] organizations is that I tend to come in and work with a small team that's committed to changing. We establish some shared understandings of what the opportunities are; that tends to be anything from an hour to a day worth of workshopping. An understanding of "What are the opportunities? What are the frameworks and models we need to use to move forward?" And then we tend to look at what they're doing now, and look for opportunities. And then, this ends up being more like a brainstorming session with a caveat that...the processes around brainstorming that work.

It turns out there's...the original proposal for brainstorming that came out in the 1940s isn't really the most effective approach. So people have come up with other names for it like "brain-draining" or something; I can't remember the other buzz phrases. But they start wrapping in these other elements of the process that makes it more effective, and that's just an editorial soapbox side that says, "We use good processes to generate a lot of opportunities that might be there." And then we tend to go back and strategize and say, "How do we prioritize these? What are the next things?" Keeping in mind, again, those frameworks that you

established about "Start small, experiment, measure." There are a lot of elements that we'll talk about in the presentation that are necessary to make innovation work.

Because we want to do is more organizations...sometimes, it's just about improving their optimal execution. But almost always, it's also talking about "How do they start facilitating the agility that's going to be critical to organizations going forward?" Because things aren't going to slow down. Things aren't getting simpler.

What we have to do is have the ability to probe what's happening out there and to come back and sense and make sense of it, and figuring out, "How are we going to react?" And then try that, and see how is it working? And if it's working, we want to do more of that. And if it's not, we want to run back and try something else. But...[inaudible 00:13:51] organizations.

People in many organizations go, "Oh, what we have to do, we have too much pressure, we don't have time for that." A simple and flexible and small organization like the U.S. military is shifting like this. You look at Stan McChrystal's team of teams and he's talking about "Break it up into small groups that are experimenting and trying stuff up and continually improve." This is doable. Its converging evidence indicates that this is the approach that has to be taking. It's the approach that works. And starting small and making experiments and finding things that work and then scaling that out is the path and the way I work with people to do this. Get them set on the path, get them understanding that, and then check and install checkpoints along the way that where I drop back in and see how things are going and make suggestions to moving forward. Does that make sense?

NIC: Yes, it does. There's something going on throughout the Internet world where people who are not trained in much the same way that you are in metacognition or even just education in general, there are people who are making businesses of developing courses just generally on various topics. What is your opinion of this, this trend that seems to be going on? People developing courses without having a background in learning?

Quinn: Donna, I think it's really interesting. What there is is a great hunger for improvement. There's great pressures to improve. And people...learning, when it's done well, it's fun. One of the mantras from the first book about thinking, learning, and engaging is that learning can

and should be hard fun.

So there's a great desire for it, there's the opportunity to create courses. People who understand learning...no, people who understand a domain want to help other people understand that. And that passion to share is admirable. The flip side is is it effective? Is it going to lead to new things? And there's an interesting dynamic right now...and we don't do enough measurement in learning. We don't look and measure impact. If you look at something like the Kirkpatrick model that says "Level 1, you can see if people like it." "Level 2, you see if it actually could do something different at the end of the learning experience." "Level 3, are they applying that in the workplace? Are they actually changing what they're doing?" And Level 4 is [inaudible 00:16:36] achieving an impact in the business. And you're supposed to start at Level 4 and work back, what needs to change.

But the problem...too many people are just doing Level 1. Did people like it? And that they paid for it? Sure. But the correlation between whether people think it's good for them and whether it's actually good for them is about zero. At some point, we need to have...people are going to start looking for metrics of effectiveness and saying, "Does this actually work?" And some of these...the providers are beginning to move to competency-based learning, so that we actually determine what they need to be able to do, and we then measure their ability to do it, that's a good movement.

And a lot of things that can feel good, like being with a bunch of people and discussing things, can change what we know, but not necessarily change what we can do. I admire the people that are doing it. I think they need to partner or get experienced and creating learning experiences. But as long as you start following some of the best models...and unfortunately, the most popular models aren't necessarily the best models...it's a dynamic marketplace. I think a lot of...there's going to be a shakeout, eventually, when people start realizing...it's nice that with a bunch of different people doing it, we're seeing a bunch of different models and a bunch of different ways, and we can sort through. And people can find something that resonates for them.

But ultimately, there's some concern about whether it's effective, and I guess that's what I'm saying and sharing what your question was implying. Not always very effective at learning, and ultimately, we're going to need to have demonstrable outcomes...[inaudible 00:18:24] awhile ago, Pine and Gilmore wrote a book called "The Experience

Economy." And they said, "We had moved from the agriculture economy, to an industrial, to a service economy, and now we're having an experience economy." They argued what the next level was was going to be transformative experiences. That's what's going to be the next economy where people are paying for experiences and develop them in meaningful ways. But I think for that to become a true economy, it's going to require an understanding that that transformation achieves some real outcome that is not purely internal, but demonstrably externally as well.

NIC: That's interesting. Okay. A lot of what people are doing now and I see [inaudible 00:19:15] some of this as well, is moving toward teaching through video or like an online type of platform. Over on your website, not you, specifically, but Quinnovation, your company. On your website, it said something to the effect of "We want to go beyond simply online learning." And so, that intrigued me because if it's not video, and if it's not, say, like a little module that you click through in kind of like an e-course, then what else is there besides that other than face to face? If it's not face to face and if it's not online, then what else is there?

Quinn: Well, let me be clear. And at first, [inaudible 00:20:14], Quinnovation actually actually is me. I am Quinnovation. I'm the sole owner, proprietary employee, chief bottle washer. It's not that...the concern is not that it's just online. The concern is "What are they doing?" Whether it's face to face or online, if you're just consuming information, watching video, and responding to knowledge questions, you're not really developing abilities. Unless the ability is to develop knowledge, not skill.

But I want to suggest, the ability to recite things back is not what's going to make a difference to organizations. What's going to make a difference to organizations [inaudible 00:21:07] is the ability to make better decisions. A better ability to do. And to do that, in the learning experience, you have to make those decisions. So it can't be content in a quiz, as I somewhat derogatorily refer to it as. It can't be an information dump and a knowledge test. To really get people developing abilities face to face or online, they have to be doing things. They have to be creating things like they need to be creating in the workplace, like responses to queries or spreadsheets that model some part of the business, or presentations. And they also need to be making decisions about how to interact with people. Being faced with the person, with an issue, and deciding, "Am I going to approach it this way or that way?"

And giving people frameworks to do that is a critical part of making effective learning." And so, when you started [inaudible 00:22:03] online and you said a video or content with a module with a little knowledge check, it depends on what that knowledge check is. If it's a scenario where they're immersed in a situation with a context in a particular situation that occurred that they have to make a decision about, and then after they make that decision, it might lead to other decisions, or it might...there might just be the consequences and then they get feedback. But they need to be doing that. Or they might need to be producing something; producing a report or producing a presentation.

These are the activities that they need to do out in the world, and that's what we need to have them doing in the learning experience. It's more about what are they doing, than whether it's online or face to face. And that's the essential element. And in fact, we're seeing now problem-based learning models that says, "Give people a challenge, and then give them resources like videos or books or anything else to help them succeed, rather than give them the content beforehand, before they know why it's important." And then you give them a task. And too often, we're giving inappropriate tasks.

There's a whole effort [inaudible 00:23:12] several colleagues went about called the "Serious eLearning Manifesto," where we differentiated between traditional learning and effective, serious eLearning. Eight points we thought were sort of critical in making that shift. This is the type of...the thinking that has to happen on the sort of optimal execution side that says, "Well, we need people to be able to do things differently. Our learning really has to be aligned with how we really learn." And we don't really learn by hearing knowledge and reciting it back. In cognitive science, we call that inert knowledge.

You'll pass a test on it; you go out in the real world where it's relevant and it won't even get activated, because you've never applied that knowledge, you've only had to retrieve it. These are some nuances. But the critical difference between learning that's available and learning that's effective is understanding absolutely how we really learn. There's a lot of stuff out there that's well-produced that really isn't designed for learning, and that's a problem.

NIC: Right, okay. Let's say we're in the professional environment then within an organization. Then if you are a trainer, then what you need to do is not just provide the content and the check for knowledge. But you also need to be innovative yourself, and perhaps come up with some

experiential ways that your students can learn how to do whatever this task is that you're requiring them to do. And this, perhaps, will mean that you can't just expect to train someone one time for one hour, and then have them walk out of the room knowing exactly how to do what you've think you've taught them how to do.

So perhaps, what you're also saying is that learning maybe takes a little bit more of an investment; if not necessarily in funding, then also in time. Is that correct?

Quinn: I couldn't agree more, you're absolutely right. That's one of the things we know about how our brains work is that we strengthen relationships between neurons. It makes it easier for them to fire together the next time. "The neurons that fire together, wire together," as the saying goes. That's really what learning is, is strengthening activations between patterns.

And there's only so much strengthening that can happen in any one day before the system just can't strengthen anymore. It's fatigued the learning muscle, basically. And so then, you need sleep. And if you really need that...too often, we do practice until they get it right, and that's not going to lead to a transformed ability to do; we need to practice until they can't get it wrong. So we're supposed to space it out. There's a number of other elements that also play a role.

So when learners...that time when learners are together in the training room is valuable. They should be doing stuff that takes advantage of having their colleagues there. Whether, as you suggested, the experiential role plays or hands-on if they're learning to use a piece of equipment should be in the lab. That's why medical facilities will have...training labs have lots of the devices around there. In flight simulators, you have simulators of planes.

Use of that face to face time is expensive, to get them away from their job, to have them in the room. I want to make that really high-value. So one of the things we talked about is blended learning. So before you come into the class, let's get you through some stuff that makes sure everybody is on the same page and ready to go, and take advantage of that learning experience. And in fact, I know companies that you can't sign up for the face to face portion until you've completed. You can't sign up for one of the scheduled face to face times if you haven't actually completed the online material to make sure you're prepared for that face to face session.

And then, there's follow-up afterwards. And that can include streaming additional things...we know one of the advantages of mobile is we can stream out little things that reactivate just a little bit each day is far better than a whole bunch at one time. And so, we can stretch it out...and coaching and mentoring. Start looking at learning as a more continual event and take maybe a 70/20/10 model that says "What are the assignments we can do to develop them? What is the coaching and mentoring we can wrap around this to continue to develop them after the event ends?"

NIC: That's fascinating. Okay. Given all of that, and where we should be going, where do you foresee learning and training...let's just say training, because learning, that's something else entirely. Where do you see training in the next five to ten years?

Quinn: You want my optimistic or cynical viewpoint? I've been railing about learning design for years as have a number of my colleagues. And we're seeing too small a movement. But I think we're reaching an inflection point where it's going to happen.

Where I'd love to see it is where people...when somebody asks for a course, asks for training...and by the way, training should lead to learning. It's a probabilistic enterprise. You want to increase the likelihood that the learning will actually happen.

But I would love to see the way training could and should be going, and would like to think that in five to ten years, we're going to get there. When somebody says there's a training need, you go in and investigate...you do what's called performance consulting and say "Is this is a point where they need new skills?"

What happens if you look at the performance consulting lecture, many times, it's knowledge that could be in the world. It needs a lookup table, a job aid, a decision tree would be more effective than training because it's just that...it's about recalling this information. And our brains are really bad at remembering arbitrary and rote information. We're much better at pattern-matching and meme-making.

So we identify "What are the skills? What are the patterns we need to match? What are the decisions we need to make?" And we want to know "How are we going to know it's effective?" We want to know "What measure will tell us that we have made the change we need to change?"

When you have a training need, what is the gap? What aren't people doing that they need to be doing, and then, what's the root cause? And if we can measure it...and then we can decide whether it's a job aid, whether it's so unique and unusual and it's changing so fast, we should just connect them to an expert. Or do we actually develop a course? And then when we develop a course, we start saying, "What are the competencies? What do they need to be able to do?"

And once...I'd like us to see have very good behavioral objectives for a cognitive plan big on behavioral objectives that says, "How do we know what they need to do, and how will we be able to tell they're doing it?" And then when we work backwards and design the practice that says, "What are the activities?" I'd like the curriculum to be a series of activities, not a series of contexts to say "What if they did this and they did this, and they did this?" They're going to be able to do that.

It's this working backward from the training need to...including the measure that we'll know it's developing the training experience. That is aligned, that's given practice and resource with content. And then we put it in place, and we're not done. Then we test it and see if it's having impact and we tune it. Because people...one of the things that's arguably the most complex thing in the known universe is the human brain. And the thought that we can reliably change it with simplistic techniques is just under-informed.

What we need to do is then make our complex interventions that we hope are going to change the brain in reliable, predictable ways, and test it, and tune it until it's achieving it. And we don't say we're done until we do it. Now, that seems like a lot more work than what we're doing now. And you said people could be worried about cost and time and budgets around this.

But there's something to keep in mind. First, once you get used to it, it becomes fairly efficient, and the overhead is relatively marginal. The other thing is that we stop doing courses when courses aren't the right answer. We stop doing training. We start looking at job aids and the social network of people. And we have other solutions where we're only developing courses when that's absolutely what we need to do, and then we do it right. And that's what I would hope to see training beginning to understand and beginning to work towards doing over the next five and ten years.

NIC: "What can we expect from your presentation?" Is there anything

that you want to add to that?

Quinn: Yeah. I was requested to, in fitting with the theme of the conference, I will be talking about innovation. Why it's important, what it is, and most importantly, how do you develop it? How do you get there? How do you create an agile organization? I think it's essentially an organizational imperative. I don't see anybody who can avoid start thinking about "How do we become more effective and more adaptive and more agile?"

And even in...I understand that the corrections area is very regulated and very constrained in many ways. But so are many of the other areas that are beginning to have to experiment with it. Again, the U.S. military, for one example, is a place where they have very effective missions. But they found they had to become adaptive. The company commander works platoons and squads in Iraq where the insurgents were changing tactics all the time, and the squads had to figure out how to adapt. And what they created was a place where they could share what they were learning, and other ones then could adapt faster. And it's this ability to be agile in ways that don't undermine the things that still have to occur. But how do we adapt in predictable ways? And there's lots to note about it.

And I think...one of my passions is sharing that. Helping people understand that and start moving in a way that lets them continue to execute while beginning to continually innovate.

NIC: All right. Is there anything that I didn't ask you that you'd like to share with the listeners?

Quinn: Not that I can think of. I encourage you to go to the center, which apparently is now open, and go look at the materials beforehand. And there's interviews and documents and materials to prepare. And I will hope that if you hear the presentation and to join in the discussion room afterwards. And bring up your questions, your issues, any concerns you have. We'd really like to help make this end up being a transformational event for you, the audience, and that you begin to take confidence that you can go out and start making changes that will improve the situation.

And there are barriers to that, I'd love to hear them, and help work through them with you.

NIC: Great. Okay, well, thank you, Clark.

Quinn: Thank you, Donna.

Announcer: This has been a broadcast of the National Institute of Corrections. The views presented are those of the speakers and do not necessarily represent the policy or position of the National Institute of Corrections.

We hope you enjoyed this broadcast.

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