

# AITD 2025 CONFERENCE

After months of planning and many hours of preparation, the AITD 2025 Conference was a resounding success. Held at the Sofitel in Melbourne on 22 and 23 May, AITD’s signature event featured a program that inspired and delighted.

AITD was truly humbled by the number of L&D professionals from around Australia who seized upon the opportunity to learn about the latest trends and developments from leading experts across many sectors, and took the time to network, meet up and reconnect with friends and colleagues from near and far.



Of course, an event like this involves many people to ensure its success. We extend a very big thank you to all our wonderful presenters for generously sharing their knowledge, time and expertise, and contributing to our L&D profession. We’d like to thank our conference sponsors: Silver Plus Sponsor, Peepcoach; Bronze Exhibitor Sponsors, Cliftons Event Solutions, Communication Skills Academy, Crucial Dimensions, Guild Insurance, Pukeko Learning Solutions; Charity Partner, The Smith Family; Catering Sponsor, Coaching Centre; and Promotional Sponsors, DeakinCo. And Redseed.

And finally, thank you to everyone who attended AITD 2025. Plans are already underway for AITD 2026, which will be held in Brisbane from 13 to 15 May. We look forward to seeing you all again next year for what promises to be another outstanding event.





# AI, Adaptability and the People Factor: Reflections from AITD Conference 2025

BY CATRIONA MALCOLM

I had the pleasure of attending the AITD National Conference. Across the two days, one theme kept surfacing: AI is reshaping how we design, deliver and lead learning—but human-centred practice, critical thinking, and behavioural insight are still our greatest tools.



### LEARNING SCIENCE AS COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE – WILL THALHEIMER

Will Thalheimer opened the conference with a strong reminder that learning should enable performance, not just retention. He shared the Learning Transfer Evaluation Model (LTEM) as a practical tool to shift focus beyond content delivery. Will emphasised that:

- Valid content, attention, and comprehension are table stakes.
- Real performance requires decision-making, action, and long-term retention.
- Transfer needs to be designed for—with contextual cues, job-embedded practice, and nudges.

Will also challenged us to help learners and subject matter experts better understand what actually supports learning, not just what feels good. The key message: use what works, not what’s familiar.

### LEADERSHIP AND ENDURANCE – JAMES CASTRISSION

James Castrission’s keynote blended adventure storytelling with deep leadership insight. Using the lens of his Antarctic expedition, he explored values-based decision-making, psychological resilience, and the power of shared purpose. Just some of the key takeaways included:

- He and his best mate celebrated progress, not just outcomes.
- Their compass was both literal and metaphorical—a symbol of staying aligned to purpose.
- Even in competition, mutual respect and sportsmanship elevated everyone.

It was a powerful reminder that consistency, clarity and teamwork shape outcomes—on the ice and in the workplace.

### PARTNERING WITH AI – AMANDA J. BARNARD, SOPHIE HARDMAN, KARINA JONES, MELISSA GREEN AND RYAN BYRNE

Amanda Barnard reframed AI not as a threat, but as a capable work partner—one that, if used well, could help us think more creatively, generate new ideas, and work more efficiently. But she was clear: AI is not neutral, and neither are we. It brings embedded bias, and so do we. That’s why critical thinking, fact-checking, and human connection still matter.

Sophie Hardman shared how KPMG’s Learning Studio embeds their learning principles and design methodology into an AI-powered tool to accelerate development while maintaining quality. Designers still play the role of creative director, and SMEs are critical to ensure factual accuracy. Prompt structure matters too—Sophie encouraged the use of delimiters like # and \* to improve output.

Karina Jones brought a security-conscious lens from the Australian Army. For them, AI isn’t a shortcut—it’s a tool that must be grounded in lived experience. Her team took a measured approach, ensuring ethics, needs analysis, and performance relevance were never skipped. When AI-generated outputs included soldiers sunbathing in full uniform on a beach, the importance of context became starkly clear.

Melissa Green’s message from Legacy reminded us that automation can free up time—but only if it enables stronger human relationships. Her quote captured it

beautifully, “People step up with their hearts, but they move at the speed of trust.”

Ryan Byrne added a frontline application from Sydney Trains, using AI-driven avatars to simulate aggressive customer behaviour. Staff preferred this to traditional role play, especially when paired with strong facilitation. It’s not perfect, but it’s helping employees build confidence in a safe, supported way.

Taken together, these sessions painted a clear picture: AI can enhance our work, but only when paired with human judgement, context, ethical scrutiny, and a strong dose of humility.

### CULTURE AND SCALE – RYAN POWELL

Ryan’s session on Bunnings was a standout. As one of Australia’s most loved and trusted brands, Bunnings continues to invest in its people and culture at scale. Their learning strategy is deeply integrated with the business—built around mentorship, on-the-job learning, and local ownership.

The business, founded in 1886 by the Bunnings brothers from Hackney, London, still draws on rituals, stories, and community connections to shape how it leads and learns today. Their leadership model has remained consistent for years. The 13 leadership behaviours are all framed as ‘what’ statements, helping teams make decisions rather than prescribing how they should act.

Each team defines their own values—typically five to eight—that reflect their local community and team culture. Harvard’s Authentic Leadership program has helped strengthen this values-led approach. Mentoring and coaching are deeply embedded. Customers often seek advice on complex building or gardening tasks, so deep expertise and a culture of knowledge-sharing is essential. Some stores even have multiple generations of the same family working side by side.

With only 100 learning professionals supporting a workforce of 55,000, the learning team has built more than 1,000 programs through their in-house studio. Learning is lean, aligned to performance, and delivered when it matters. VR is used where it makes sense, such as forklift operation or de-escalating aggressive customers. AI is used to streamline process, not replace thoughtful design. Bunnings’ approach is what Ryan called radically traditional—a deep commitment to what works, delivered with care and consistency.

### LEADERSHIP, COACHING AND FACILITATION – SONIA MCDONALD, CHRISTINE KHOR AND ANNALIE BLUNDELL

Sonia McDonald’s session reminded us that leadership is a mindset. It needs to be pragmatic, supportive, and empowering—not just positional. Her call to action was clear: leadership is an attitude, and attitude drives change.

Christine Khor made a compelling case for democratising coaching, especially during transitions. Coaching shouldn’t be the sole domain of executives. It’s a high-impact tool

when people are grappling with shifts in role, identity, or team dynamics.

Annalie Blundell brought infectious energy to her session on facilitation. Her focus was on levelling up how we hold attention and drive engagement, using everything from music and movement to analogies, statistics, and well-crafted questions. Her reminder was timely: attention must be earned again and again. Great facilitators don’t rely on charisma. They rely on deliberate, thoughtful technique.

### AITD CAPABILITY FRAMEWORK LAUNCH

I was honoured to join Ben J Campbell , Kade Brown, and Lisa Elias on a panel discussion, launching the AITD Capability Framework—a long-anticipated milestone for the learning profession in Australia. Led by Ben and Michelle and built by practitioners, for practitioners, the framework involved over 100 volunteers across seven working groups, aligned to core capabilities.

It’s informed by global research and grounded in personas that reflect the diversity of roles across the sector. The framework is designed for both today and tomorrow—useful now, but also future-focused.

### OUR STORY – SELINA MCKAY, DEEPTI SACHDEVA AND ME

Selina McKay and I had the opportunity to share the story of our two-year Data and Digital Capability Uplift Program, with a video cameo from our colleague Deepti Sachdeva. We shared our journey through the lens of three roles:

- Deepti as the Visionary Project Lead
- Selina as the Pragmatic Program Manager
- Myself as the Creative Learning Designer

We didn’t present a perfect case study. Instead, we walked through the real highs and lows of scaling learning across 7,000 employees in a compliance-heavy, rapidly evolving environment. We talked about what made the program work:

- Learning that was simple, scalable, and grounded in evidence.
- Measuring success without traditional business metrics—using pre- and post-assessments, self-set goals, and demonstrations of applied skill.
- Making learning visible and social through digital badges, social activations, and an engaged alumni network.

AITD 2025 was a timely reminder: whether we’re navigating transformation, scaling learning, or responding to AI—our job remains rooted in people – and that’s what makes it worth doing.





# aitd. 2025 Excellence Awards

On Thursday 22 May 2025, we announced the winners of the 2025 AITD Excellence Awards at a glittering gala dinner. Held at the Sofitel in Melbourne, the gala dinner was attended by over 150 people.



Coveted by companies across Australia and New Zealand, the AITD Excellence Awards recognise outstanding achievements in learning and development. The Awards set new benchmarks for our members, recognising, rewarding and sharing quality and innovation across the learning and development spectrum.

AITD would like to take this opportunity to thank all our volunteer judges for 2025. Your time and dedication to the process is very much appreciated.



After a record number of entries and an exceptional calibre across the board, it was a hard-fought contest this year.

All of our finalists, winners and highly commended entries should be incredibly proud of their achievement.

## BEST BLENDED LEARNING SOLUTION



### Insurance Australia Group *Leading with Empowerment*

The *Leading with Empowerment* program is a blended learning solution that was created to execute the Insurance Australia Group (IAG) *Brimming with Talent Strategy* and embed their *Leadership Capability Framework*. IAG's Executive Talent, Leadership and Learning team recognised the need to scale leadership development across Australia and New Zealand.

IAG partnered with Be Learning to create a best-in-class leadership program to equip leaders with the mindset, skills and knowledge to lead effectively, drive results, and bring to life the IAG Way, values, and behaviours. The program aligned with existing executive leadership programs,

demonstrating and embedding leadership capabilities and strategy consistently. The need for practical, focused learning in digestible modules that could be immediately delivered led to the creation of the iconic blended learning program.

IAG co-designed the program with Be Learning. Key IAG stakeholders and managers from Australia and New Zealand were consulted to ensure it met strategic objectives and landed with target audiences. The design process took four months, including pilot re-iterations and improvements. Experienced Be Learning facilitators delivered the program to cohorts of 30, creating energy and ensuring critical mass across IAG.



BEST LEARNING CULTURE IN AN ORGANISATION



**Versent**  
*Craft|180*

A tech consulting environment presents many challenges. This includes being at the forefront of the ever-evolving technology landscape, winning work from clients in volatile economic conditions, and creating a culture of learning, craft and excellence with employees that experience different peaks, troughs and challenges based on the type of engagements they are assigned to.

Versent sought to codify and systemise the way they approach learning and development (or craft as they like to call it!) holistically.

The result is a humming, self-sustaining, collaborative and evolving learning cultural blueprint, known as Craft|180.

Versent’s Craft|180 program delivers a broad range of learning experiences, from business-wide hackathons and support to become a tech blogger, through to knowledge sharing, employee-led AI learning forums, newsletters, recognition programs and more.

Craft|180 has enabled Versent’s people by creating opportunities to learn and contribute to the learning of others in the flow of work. This in turn has strengthened their business, as their value proposition lies in the expertise and abilities of their people.

BEST DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION PROGRAM



**Wisdom Learning**  
*Wisdom Learning and the National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC) ACT Mentoring Program*

The National Association of Women in Construction (NAWIC) mentoring program addresses a critical need for gender diversity and professional development within the construction industry—an historically male-dominated field.

It directly supports NAWIC ACT’s goals of creating a more diverse and inclusive construction industry and aligns with Wisdom Learning’s expertise in designing impactful learning experiences that drive measurable change.

Wisdom Learning partnered with NAWIC ACT in 2020 to develop a tailored mentoring program that fosters career confidence, professional networks, leadership skills and industry engagement for women in construction. This program bridges the mentorship gap and drives systematic change by challenging gender biases, enhancing workplace culture and increasing career pathways for women in construction.

The program has proven instrumental in fostering mentorship culture, equipping mentees with valuable insights, and strengthening industry collaboration to ensure sustained diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) outcomes. By providing structured mentorship, leadership development, and industry networking opportunities, the program has empowered mentees, strengthened workplace diversity, and cultivated a culture of inclusion.

BEST CAPABILITY BUILDING PROGRAM



**Gold Coast City Council**  
*Best Self Series – City of Gold Coast*

The *Best Self Series*, created by the City of Gold Coast, is a transformative leadership development program aimed at shifting organisational behaviour toward high performance. Triggered by a 2022 culture survey, which revealed a reliance on ineffective behaviours, the series was designed to enhance self-leadership and cultivate constructive behaviours across the workforce. Aligning with the City’s 2022-2027 organisational plan, the program emphasises that behaviours are more important than results.

The program’s design is grounded in neuroscience, using David Rock’s AGES and SCARF models to ensure inclusivity, engagement and motivation. Blended learning methods include face-to-face

workshops, self-assessments, articles, podcasts and visual resources, offering participants an immersive and dynamic learning experience. A gamified journal stamp system motivates participation, while events like the Best Self Celebration reward success and further build program advocacy.

The series has garnered strong senior leadership support, with waitlists and a growing keenness to complete all seven workshops. It has become a cornerstone of the City’s learning culture, with high participant engagement and a remarkable 4.69/5 feedback rating. As a result, the program is now integrated into career progression pathways and is fostering a shift toward self-leadership across all levels.

BEST LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM



**TFE HOTELS**  
*ACADEME – People Leaders Program (PLP)*

TFE Hotels’ *ACADEME People Leader Program* (PLP) is a cornerstone of the company’s commitment and purpose. For over a decade, ACADEME has played a pivotal role in developing the next generation of hospitality leaders, aligning leadership growth with TFE’s broader purpose and values.

The ACADEME PLP offers a dynamic and supportive learning environment where aspiring leaders can challenge themselves, share their passion, and grow both personally and professionally. It is designed to equip participants with the leadership capabilities required to navigate the complexities of a modern hospitality business and contribute meaningfully to its future.

At the heart of the program is TFE’s distinctive culture—*Big Enough and Small Enough*—which blends the opportunities and scale of a large organisation with the personal touch of a close-knit team. This approach empowers team members to take ownership of their development and impact, while fostering a sense of belonging and connection.

With more than 100 ACADEME alumni actively shaping the organisation today, the program has cultivated a thriving community of passionate leaders. Strategically, the PLP functions as a key talent pipeline, ensuring a steady flow of capable leaders ready to step into critical roles.

BEST ONBOARDING OR INDUCTION PROGRAM



**Sodexo**  
*Operational Development Academy (ODA)*

Sodexo Australia’s Operational Development Academy redevelopment reimagines induction training with an immersive, learner-centric approach. This cutting-edge program transforms safety from a compliance requirement into an instinctive mindset, ensuring new employees live and breathe Sodexo’s culture of zero harm.

By bridging theory with real-world application, the program fosters personal accountability, making safety a natural, daily practice. This is not just training—it’s a cultural transformation that empowers employees to create a safer, more resilient workplace. The program’s core learning areas focus on fostering a culture of safety and wellbeing across the workplace. Key topics include embedding a Zero

Harm culture as a fundamental value, managing psychosocial hazards to support mental health, and applying practical tools like the Three Checks for Safety and Take Five for proactive risk assessment.

The Academy features hands-on activities and real-life scenarios for active engagement, and people-centred design that delivers tailored content that resonates with employees’ daily roles and challenges. There is also a focus on continuous learning, with reinforcement through follow-ups, microlearning, and peer collaboration. This game-changing program sets a new benchmark in safety and induction training—where safety isn’t just taught; it’s lived.

BEST USE OF TECHNOLOGY FOR LEARNING



**Sydney Trains**  
*Project CIVIL (Customer Initiated Violence Interactive Learning)*

Frontline staff at Sydney Trains frequently encounter aggressive behaviours, making effective de-escalation training critical to safety, service continuity and employee confidence. Traditional in-person workshops, while valuable, are resource-intensive and difficult to scale across a dispersed workforce of 2,000+ staff. To address these challenges, Project CIVIL was developed—an AI-powered training solution designed to provide realistic, interactive de-escalation scenarios in a controlled environment.

Using voice-activated AI simulations, employees engage in adaptive conversations with virtual customers, practicing best-practice techniques in rapport-building, empathy and assertive communication. Participants receive

immediate feedback on their approach, tracking frustration levels in real-time to refine their responses. This safe, self-paced learning experience eliminates the pressure of live role-plays while reinforcing Sydney Trains’ commitment to workplace safety and continuous learning.

Since launch, 98% of pilot participants have recommended CIVIL as a valuable training tool, with 63% applying their skills within four weeks. Self-reported confidence in handling confrontational situations has increased by 38%, and de-escalation technique scores have improved by 25%. The program’s scalability allows for broad workforce adoption, with future enhancements including mobile access and expanded training scenarios.

BEST USE OF GAMIFICATION OR SIMULATION FOR LEARNING



**Australian Red Cross Lifeblood**  
*Blood Processing Centre Virtual Tour*

The Australian Red Cross Lifeblood has developed an innovative virtual tour for haematology registrars, addressing the logistical and accessibility challenges of traditional onsite tours. This virtual tour, designed using the Successive Approximation Model (SAM) and co-design principles, offers a 360° immersive experience of Lifeblood’s collection, testing and processing areas. It includes GIFs and contextual text tailored for registrars, assisting with comprehensive understanding of transfusion medicine in a concise 30-minute format.

The virtual tour aligns with Lifeblood’s strategic goals of adapting and evolving at speed, digitising processes, and partnering widely. It supports the

National Blood Authority’s mandate for safe and reliable blood supply and enhances the training of haematology specialists. The project has shown significant engagement, with 40% of participants interacting with most of the content and 20% fully engaging with all the content.

Feedback highlighted the tour’s educational value and logistical convenience, reducing the demand on business operations and offering cost savings compared to traditional video production. The virtual tour is scalable and adaptable for various audiences, including Lifeblood employees and healthcare professionals, ensuring equitable access to essential training.

DR ALASTAIR RYLATT AWARD FOR L&D PROFESSIONAL OF THE YEAR

**Thomas Bailey**

With over 20 years of experience spanning sales, marketing and people development, Thomas Bailey has worked with iconic organisations including Kimberly-Clark, Nestlé, Coca-Cola Amatil, Blackmores, Canon and Novartis, as well as NGOs across the UK, Hong Kong and Australia. ATID’s New South Wales (NSW) Divisional President, Thomas is passionate about driving real performance through meaningful development—not just training room exercises.

Thomas recently established his own coaching and consultancy practice. Leveraging deep expertise in leadership transformation and strategic development, he is committed to unlocking potential and achieving measurable results that resonate with his client’s personal and professional goals. Thomas is an ICF Accredited Associate Certified Coach.

Thomas recently launched the Rogue L&D podcast, one of the fastest growing HR podcasts in Australia. The podcast and short video format provide insight and inspiration from global L&D thought leaders.

Since his appointment as AITD’s NSW President, Thomas has connected with, and advocated for L&D professionals. He has worked to bring the community together, raising visibility for L&D as a critical driver of business success and performance, through an ongoing calendar of events.

