

Why Hiring a Doctoral-Level Instructional Systems Consultant Delivers Strategic ROI: Addressing the Weaknesses of the Learning & Instructional Design Industry

Janice Bartké Thompson, PhD

Abstract

The field of learning and instructional design is growing rapidly, yet many interventions fail to deliver measurable performance improvements. Key reasons include undereducated practitioners, low compensation that leads to undervaluation, and a lack of grounding in theory and research. This document outlines the problems inherent in current practice, explains how research-based instructional systems design (ISD) addresses them, and explains why engaging a PhD-level consultant is a positive investment in organizational performance and learning ROI.

Problems in the Learning & Instructional Design Industry

On a single day's examination of the LinkedIn employment postings (LinkedIn, 2025) by employers seeking Instructional Designers (a generic description), sixteen variants of job titles were listed, with qualifications ranging from high school graduate to master's degrees. A few examples to demonstrate: Instructional Specialist, Instructional Support Specialist, Instructional Coordinator, Instructional Technologist, Instructional Design Support Specialist, Instructional Design and Development Specialist, Educational Expert, and only one listed as Instructional Designer. Highlighting the minimum qualifications, i.e., knowledge, skills, abilities, education, experience, certifications, and licensure, of the Instructional Designer position sought are exemplified below:

- Bachelor's degree and three (3) years of relevant professional experience.
- Comprehensive knowledge of instructional design theories and methodologies.
- Knowledge of trending approaches/technologies/standards (e.g., Gamification, Active learning, Social Learning, Project-based learning) and software products used in higher education (AI services, Canvas LMS, Quizzes, Articulate Rise, H5P, EchoVideo, Qualtrics, Canva, video creation tools like Powtoon or Vyond).
- Experience developing course materials in an LMS (Canvas preferred).
- Strong Project Management skills. Able to manage time and multiple projects simultaneously, set priorities, accomplish goals, and meet deadlines.
- Ability to analyze and process large volumes of informational materials and to structure information.
- Exceptional verbal and written communication skills. Ability to proofread, edit, and produce effective written materials and presentations.
- Demonstrated ability to communicate technical concepts to a non-technical audience, work independently and/or with multiple constituencies, speak or make presentations before groups, and conduct effective training.
- Strong skills in IT, visual presentation designing, and developing clear instructional materials in written, graphic, audio, video, or multimedia form, with creativity and attention to detail.

Each job description was dense with employer wishes and hopes. Buried in all the posts are unicorn expectations. The reality of the instructional domain, as demonstrated within the employment requirements, is askew. It is not the intent to diminish the accomplishments and skills of any individual working in the field; certainly, some may be qualified and accomplished with the depth of knowledge, skill, and experience required. However, despite the wealth of qualifications, research suggests that four areas of concern contribute to marginal outcomes.

First, there exists an oversaturation of underqualified practitioners. Many individuals entering the field of instructional design hold minimal credentials. The quick self-taught tools courses and “course builder” applications, combined without a solid grounding in learning theory, cognitive science, or system design, result in no more than pretty, ill-structured, boring presentations with little educational value, usually at excessive cost with minimal ROI. The course media may be visually polished and contextually accurate; however, the learning objectives, outcomes, and transfer to performance are weakly aligned. The application of technical proficiency, e.g., authoring tools, often outweighs pedagogical and andragogical expertise.

Education is a commodity with wholesale and retail monetary value to individual students, schools, and industry. Education is a business enterprise at multiple levels. Courses are being generated by individuals with AI applications such as ChatGPT and marketed on YouTube. Schools and universities are packaging short-duration specialty and community courses. In the corporate environment, from CEOs across the corporate landscape, employees require training in systems and processes to become increasingly effective producers. The global e-learning services market size in 2024 was estimated at USD 299.67 billion and is projected to reach USD 842.64 billion by 2030 (Grand View Research 2025). Because many organizations treat learning as a cost center rather than a strategic asset, instructional designers are often hired at low wages, reinforcing a low-expectations cycle. The instructional domain requires low-compensation employees and limited professionalization of the skills needed to control instructional costs, which diminishes the product outcome. Underpaid designers may lack time, support, or incentives to keep up with emerging research, best practices, or quality evaluation. This undervaluing of expertise means the organization often ends up paying for ineffective training.

Effective instructional design is not merely “getting content online” but following frameworks grounded in learning science. Behaviorism, cognitive load theory, constructivism, social learning, and system models such as ADDIE, SAM, Agile ISD, Action Mapping, or Design Thinking require a complex understanding of their complexities and scope beyond the simplicity of acronyms (Abuhassna and Alnawajha 2023). Without this theoretical grounding, design tends to be ad-hoc, reactive, and heavily content-driven rather than outcome-driven. If researchers Kruger and Dunning (1999) were correct in their findings, incompetence in learning theory is exemplified as design genius. Research shows that when instructional system design (ISD) is intentionally applied with cogent intent through the laborious stages of systematic analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation, learning outcomes improve (Battles 2006).

Often overlooked or intentionally dismissed, the physical learning environment is crucial. If the environment is not conducive to quality instruction, poor learning and ineffectual outcomes result. Training may focus on completion rates, hours logged, or slide decks rather than measurable behavior change or performance improvement. Learning experiences may be cognitively shallow: overloaded content, minimal practice, weak feedback loops, and poor

alignment to job tasks. These weak designs yield poor retention, weak transfer to the workplace, and no meaningful return for the investment. Research emphasizes that instructional design must integrate multiple resources and strategies and align content with learners' characteristics and environments (Isman et al. 2003).

The Value of Research-Based Instructional Systems Design

Every day, around the world, researchers systematically query existing knowledge, formulate research questions, conduct experiments, and collect and analyze data to test a hypothesis, with the intent to contribute to the body of human knowledge and experience by publishing findings and engaging in peer review. Research is the foundation for effective learning. Instructional systems and the design of effective learning are the result of systematic method research originally developed for military training programs and subsequently adapted for corporate and educational contexts (Pinto 2025). Effective design relies on principles such as clear learning objectives, needs analysis, iterative evaluation, feedback loops, and adaptivity (SNU Professional and Graduate Studies 2023). Empirical research (for example, in patient safety training) shows that ISD generates more reliable performance improvements (Battles 2006). The benefit: design that is not guesswork but grounded in what works for learning and transfer.

Learning systems focus on strategic alignment and performance, with a skilled consultant conducting a front-end needs analysis to identify performance gaps, root causes (training vs non-training), learner characteristics, environment, and business context. The instructional system processes ensure that training is aligned with organizational strategy, not just delivered for the sake of it. Moreover, the evaluation phase links training to measurable outcomes, e.g., via Kirkpatrick levels or ROI modelling, thus equating training expenditure with business value.

Doctoral-level consultants remain current with emerging research in adaptive learning, AI-driven systems, gamification, cognitive load management, and multimedia learning. They apply frameworks so that content is not “flashy” alone, but is built for cognitive efficiency, engagement, and transfer. The product developed at this level of expertise builds improvement loops through instructional systems that continuously evaluate, iterate, and adapt, ensuring training remains relevant as business needs change. Engaging high-level instructional systems experts leads to rigorous design, not ad hoc deployment. Retaining an instructional systems consultant means less waste, fewer repeats, fewer redesigns, and fewer training disappointments. Combined with better learner satisfaction, stronger transfer, and measurable improvement reduces the cost of poor training, lost productivity, and employee and instructional designer turnover.

When the cost of poor training becomes measurable in dollars and cents, those whose money has been poorly spent ask questions. When training is poorly designed, organizations often observe low completion rates, minimal behavior change, wasted time for both learners and instructors, poor credibility for learning and development functions, and higher turnover because employees feel unsupported. These translate into hidden costs, including lost productivity, repeated training, disengagement, and sub-optimal performance.

With instruction designed as a business system, every aspect is designed to increase learner engagement, improve knowledge retention, support attentive application of skills on the job, and deliver measurable business outcomes through increased productivity, reduced errors, and improved compliance. Research indicates that a cogent instructional system, as a design template, aligns learning programs with business goals, improving knowledge retention and

recall, and thereby increasing workforce productivity (Smith 2012-2025). When you align training to strategic objectives, the ROI becomes more obvious, and training becomes part of a performance deliverable rather than a sidebar cost.

Why a PhD-level instructional systems consultant?

The PhDs at Instructional Systems Consulting bring depth with theoretical knowledge, research methods, evaluation expertise, and systems thinking. With expertise, the PhD consultant creates strategic value by not only building modules but also shaping the learning ecosystem, aligning it with performance metrics, and developing evaluation and improvement frameworks. This level of expertise typically pays dividends in better-quality training, less waste, stronger outcomes, a better reputation for the learning department, greater alignment with organizational goals, and thus higher ROI. By ensuring the consultant's credentials, clients have confidence in the outcome from the start. Their experience is research-based instructional systems design, not just software or rapid content development. They define clear business outcomes first. They ask questions. Lots of questions: What performance gap are you addressing? What metrics matter? They use front-end analysis of needs, learners, environment, tasks, and obstacles. They ensure the design includes iterative evaluation from the first pilot implementation through measurement of results to the iterative refinement of delivery. The process aligns with the overall organizational strategy, not just department goals. Considering the total cost of ownership, development, delivery, evaluation, and maintenance, and comparing them with expected gains in performance, productivity, and learner retention, the value becomes apparent. Throughout development, building internal capacity for continuous improvement becomes the focus, and the consultant builds instructional system frameworks rather than delivering one-off courses.

The field of instructional design is at a pivotal moment. Organizations that treat learning as a strategic capability and invest in research-based, systemically designed, and evaluated training will outperform those that view training as a cost center and rely on ad hoc content development by unqualified practitioners. Hiring a doctoral-level instructional systems consultant is not an expense; it is an investment in organizational intelligence, adaptability, and performance. In short, shift from “training delivered” to “learning applied, and performance improved.”

References

- Abuhassna, Hassan; Alnawajha, Samer (2023): Instructional Design Made Easy! Instructional Design Models, Categories, Frameworks, Educational Context, and Recommendations for Future Work. In *European Journal of Investigation in Health, Psychology and Education*, 13(4), pp. 715–735. DOI: 10.3390/ejihpe13040054.
- Battles, J. B. (2006): Improving patient safety by instructional systems design. In *Quality & safety in health care* 15 Suppl 1 (Suppl 1), 1-5. DOI: 10.1136/qshc.2005.015917.
- Grand View Research (2025): E-learning Services Market Size, Share & Trends Analysis Report By Type (Custom E-learning, Responsive E-learning), By Courses, By Learning Method, By Technology, By End-use, By Region, And Segment Forecasts, 2025 - 2030. Available online at <https://www.grandviewresearch.com/industry-analysis/e-learning-services-market>, updated on 9/7/2025, checked on 9/7/2025.

Isman, Aytejub; Dabaj, Fahme; Altimay, Zehra; Altinay, Fahriye (2003): Effects of Instructional Design on Learning. In *ERIC*.

Kruger, Justin; Dunning, David (1999): Unskilled and Unaware of It: How Difficulties in Recognizing One's Own Incompetence Lead to Inflated Self-Assessments. In *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 77 (6), pp. 1121–1134, checked on 10/28/2025.

Pinto, Inez (2025): Instructional design in e-learning: models, principles, and benefits. Available online at https://www.easygenerator.com/en/guides/instructional-design-for-elearning/?utm_source=chatgpt.com, updated on 12/18/2023, checked on 10/27/2025.

Smith, Cydnie (2012-2025): What is instructional design, and what are the benefits? Available online at https://www.neovation.com/learn/79-what-is-instructional-design?utm_source=chatgpt.com, updated on 10/27/2025, checked on 10/27/2025.

SNU Professional and Graduate Studies (2023): Beyond Content: Understanding the Holistic Approach of Instructional Designers in Learning Design. Available online at https://www.snu.edu/blog/beyond-content-understanding-the-holistic-approach-of-instructional-designers-in-learning-design?utm_source=chatgpt.com, updated on 10/27/2025, checked on 10/27/2025.