# PUBLIC SECTOR FUTURE podcast – Episode 6 – e-Estonia: Using Data to Deliver Better Services

**Talent:**

**1. Olivia Neal [host]**

**2. Siim Sikkut [guest]**

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**OLIVIA NEAL:** Hello and welcome to Public Sector Future. This is a show for anyone who cares about using digital approaches in the public sector to deliver better outcomes. I’m your host, Olivia Neal, and together, we explore stories from around the world where public servants have been successful at driving change. We meet the people behind the stories, hear their firsthand experiences and their lessons learned. Throughout the series, we discuss technology and trends as well as the cultural aspects of making change happen.

I’m delighted to be joined today by Siim Sikkut, the Chief Information Officer of the Government of Estonia. We’re going to be talking about what it’s like to be the CIO of one of the world’s leading digital governments, how digital approaches can build trust between people and their governments, and where next for Estonia.

Siim, welcome to the show.

**SIIM SIKKUT:**  Thanks so much, Olivia.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** I think we first met, Siim, in – I was looking back at this – I think we first met in 2014, maybe back about seven years ago in London in the government digital service, when you came for a visit to look at what the UK government were doing. And then we’ve met a number of times over the years in lots of different countries.

**SIIM SIKKUT:**  Oh yeah, exactly. I think we were so young then. (Laughter.) It must have been the – yeah, in the café downstairs from GDS, right? I was picking your brain about all the stuff you guys were doing, going with service standards, right?

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Yeah, I think so. And then I think the next time was probably in Tallinn for the OECD e-Leaders conference.

**SIIM SIKKUT:**  Indeed, we did. So, lots of – lots of good meetings with you.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So, if you’re listening to this podcast about digital transformation in the public sector, then for sure, you already know something about Estonia’s reputation, but let’s just start with a quick recap.

So, Estonia as very widely known, is one of the world’s leading digital governments. Ninety-nine percent of government services are online. The Estonian government focuses very heavily on how data can be reused across different government services in order to ease the burden on citizens, ease the burden on businesses, and provide really joined up experiences.

But the Estonian approach is more than just about better service delivery. What’s fascinating about Estonia is they are pushing the boundaries on how we think about digital nations, for example, through the e-Residency program, which has seen more people become e-residents in a week than there were babies being born, so really starting to challenge and stretch our ideas of what we think about a digital nation encompassing.

This is really embedded across the Estonian culture and has been leading to a really, really thriving digital and tech private sector.

So, from a government perspective, we really see some of the foundations of these approaches being a fully embedded approach to digital identity, a data exchange platform called X-Road, which allows data to be exchanged and reused, and really importantly, there is a foundation of relentlessly driven and motivated public servants like Siim who make all of this happen.

Siim of his colleagues use that reputation as leaders around the world, not just to move Estonia forward, but to support all other countries to move forward, to learn lessons together. Siim is outlooking and engaged, and incredibly generous with his time and his knowledge, so really, really delighted that Siim is here with us today to share some of these experiences with this audience.

So, Siim, let’s go back to when you first became CIO. I think you became CIO in 2017. How did you set your priorities in your role? What did you was your first area to get going with?

**SIIM SIKKUT:**  First of all, I still have to say it to you, you made me blush – (laughter) – because, no, look, honestly, we get so humbled to get so much praise around the world. But look, we’ve been only doing this really for our users and citizens, right? So it’s just been very pragmatic in terms of making the best use of tech in terms of delivering a better government. And I think this is really goes to the heart of the question in the CIO role with our government CIO office here. So, this is what really drives our priorities. What next can we do, for example, to keep making our government work better?

And it’s an endless job, because tech moves ahead, so that taste and appetite of users moves ahead, and so on, so on. And I think what many listeners here hopefully can appreciate is that, in the end, it’s easy to do flagship stuff, right, to try out the next cool tech to basically, pick up the next sort of new project. But what we have after is to see, okay, how can we systematically change the machinery of government to consistently up the game throughout the government? And that’s the hard, daily, stuff that needs to be done. And that’s where most of the priorities that you see how to make systemic change happen.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And so, did you have an area, when you started in your role, that you felt that systemic change needed to move forward with, within the public service?

**SIIM SIKKUT:**  Indeed, there’s quite a few things, we have been trying to do in the last few years. First of all, our challenge is on two fronts. So, as a government CIO, I stand on many shoulders. I’m fourth or fifth generation in the line of CIOs, for example. So, a lot of our job is to do two things, : Keep improving and,, sustaining what has been built before, so not stalling, and at the same time doing it with innovation, taking the stuff to the next level, right?

So, a lot of what we have had to work with is, so how do we change the underlying tech orientation, for example, stuff like how do we move to cloud, how do we move from our legacy, what is built up so far, right, to the cloud setting? How do we update our architectural approach? So, how do we change the thinking and the competence in the government, for example, to be much more sort of modular and micro service, based, as opposed, to doing the old way of doing IT?

At the same time, a lot of my focus has been on how do we change the innovation game, right? So, basically, how do we bring in experimentation culture more, so that agencies keep trying new ways of doing things, and not just even in tech, but also in service approach?

But the fundamental thing, and this is where we still – I’m very honest to say we are learning the ropes, is to say that how do we bring user centricity? How do we really bring in that, – behind every service, there’s somebody that wakes up in the morning thinking, how can I make my service now better for the people on the street.

So, that’s still an ongoing challenge for us, exactly to bring that into all of the government. We have clear front runners in this field. we’ve had some progress, but it’s still scaling of that, that keeps us busy daily.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So, a lot of different areas of focus, both on the technology side, on the architecture, on the user centricity, and really embedding that culture of continuous iteration, continuous improvement, and bringing in that innovation and experimentation.

**SIIM SIKKUT:**  Absolutely. And that’s exactly to do that, I think, compared to many of the colleagues who are basically, starting with transformation or restarting transformation, our job is exactly two-fold at the same time. So, we have more balls in the air, so to speak, keeping stuff improving what has been built and building the next thing at the same time.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Okay, yeah, that makes sense. And so, in the time that you have been CIO, and obviously, you were in the government of Estonia before, so you’ve been embedded in this world for a number of years now, what have you been most proud of achieving in that time that you’ve been CIO or as you’ve been in the government?

**SIIM SIKKUT:**  I still have the stuff left in my career, so, you know, it’s too early to start wrapping up. (Laughter.)

**OLIVIA NEAL:** (Laughter.) Okay, what are you most proud of at this moment in time?

**SIIM SIKKUT:**  What I think I would highlight first things, in the CIO role, we clearly have managed to get the experimentation side going. So, that was sort of a second challenge that I brought up where we saw it very clearly. We built up this approach with artificial intelligence take up so that we have been driving from CIO office.

And what we really see, we have gained momentum as a public sector with dozens of concrete, practical use cases of applying AI in our government now, which was started from scratch two years ago. And now we’re talking about sort of actually movement and the momentum. And that taught us quite a few things in terms of how to really lead more. I mean, government CIO service before was quite laid back, and now, we’ve become more exactly like leadership and sort of, steering role, as opposed to just policy coordinator in the backend.

Secondly, what I value a lot, is that we have managed to work a lot on the governance of how we work, so basically building up our team, and etcetera. Interesting things is that Estonian journey has very much been very decentralized governance set up, every agency doing their own thing. So, we rebuilt a lot of that all the way to better architecture management, I think a few tricks we learned from Canada, for example, at the time, right, how to do architectural review and stuff.

So, bringing that in and basically building up, and rebuilding a common playground and rule set that everybody plays with, not just, for example, in terms of interoperability and security, which we always had, but also in terms of, all the way to the service standard now, some architecture rules and stuff like that has been a big part, because that defines what good looks like, as you used to say in Britain.

And the third thing is we have basically managed to change the rhetoric. We managed it through the strategy making and evangelism. We at least within public sector, have built up a movement in terms of how to make stuff happen proactively in the backend. So, the rhetoric now is the best service is something that happens invisibly for the user, So, if my child is born, I don’t just have an opportunity to go somewhere online and get my stuff done, right, but rather, the government proactively comes to me. And through that interaction, I get stuff done at one go, whatever happens in my life. So, we have managed to create this movement, and now, we have to really build that out, and roll it out and deliver on this.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So, there’s three things there, the first one being that an experimentation point, so picking a new area of technology that you think can benefit and really getting use cases out there, getting this tested, getting this piloted, getting people bought in and pushing that forward. Then you’ve got the rigor around the governance and having a cohesive approach, not just for technology, but for the way that we think that good services look like. And then, the third one, the evangelism of creating a public service that comes with you and can talk passionately about this as well.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So, I wanted just to talk a little bit about one area where I think Estonia have really taken a very proactive approach, which I know that lots of other countries are interested in. So, I mentioned earlier a little bit about the way that Estonia share data in order to deliver better services and to relieve that burden on citizens, so that if you are a citizen of Estonia, the government cannot ask you a second time for a piece of information. The government has to find that information where is already exists and reuse that.

And that’s a conversation that, in lots of countries, causes some nervousness with people and I think really triggers people to think, okay, do we have control of data is shared? Do we have transparency? Will I understand where it’s going.

But what Estonia did, which I’d like to ask you a little bit about, Siim, is you took that approach of saying, we’re going to deliver better services using data, but at the same time, we’re going to increase the transparency to people about their own data. And I think that approach really starts to balance out and show what are the benefits of this to the citizen alongside the services. And could you tell us a little bit about what you did there to create that transparency and build that trust?

**SIIM SIKKUT:**  Well, first, what you very neatly brought out is that it’s all a sort of once-only approach, right, so where, yes, government has to rather sort of reuse in the backend. And that was, for us, a way to reinforce some platform approach, that was for us the way to enforce that, if we have this beautiful X road, we should allow this to connect all the data together. We have to use it more.

And that was really forcing, in the end, user centricity, by the way, because what I believe very strongly is that once-only is, in a way, is one of the components of ultimate best user experience. I’m not being troubled again and again with stuff that somebody already knows about me. Interactions become faster, simpler, more seamless, really, for that matter. So, that drove us to this once-only policy.

And that’s, by the way, also an example where I believe where I see a lot of discussion, obviously for good reasons, in the world around, you know, changing laws to reduce barriers. Our thinking has been like, hey, can we both use the classic tool of government regulation also to give us a kick in the butt, basically to give us a push as an enabler for digitization. And once again is an example of that. It forces government to go more digital, in a way.

The way we managed to make this work, and from, just like you said, to avoid privacy concerns, well, two things, first of all, all of this exactly sharing happens in a way that I, as a citizen, should have an overview of what happens to my data. So, I can go into my medical health records, see how the next doctor has looked into my stuff or what we are now building out with government wide data tracker. So, through our citizen portal or our national portal, we could then have access to, let’s say, overview of all of the data that government holds about me and who has access to what and so forth.

And then there’s obviously the whole data protection framework behind. I can go in and inquire, why did somebody look into my stuff? And we’ve had cases where somebody was fined or laid off from government, if they peeked into stuff they shouldn’t have.

But secondly, what’s more fundamental there is that it’s not only overview, but it’s also control. I can also block access to my data if I like. And so, I might then let go of some of the perks, like, you know, I won’t be able to get a proactive service or, if I block part of my health record, the next doctor would have to run some tests, and in a critical condition, that can be deadly to me, but I have this right.

So, in law around EU and more widely, this theoretical notion of me owning my data is there, but we have built it into a feature level. And that gives people quite a lot of ultimate trust into trusting us with the data.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So, you’re giving people the opportunity to say, first off, I can see who’s accessed my data. If I don’t believe they should have accessed my data, I can challenge that. And there are consequences for those people. And then secondly, I have the ownership of that, and I can make a decision on whether I’m okay with this being shared, and that means I get these joined up services, or if I don’t, I accept, as a citizen, that I’m going to have to take some of that burden of re-providing that.

**SIIM SIKKUT:**  Yeah, exactly. And it’s an opt-out setup like that. But what I want to enforce here for all those colleagues around the world who perhaps are thinking about once-only and hasten to develop that, but provide people an opt-in. Give them a chance to get the seamless and joined-up service, at the very least, and obviously, you have to build trust mechanisms and features in, but still, give them the option. Don’t decide for them.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** I think this is a really concrete example of how using a data platform and delivering better services, if you put – user centricity at the heart of it, and you really are. You’re thinking how will users interact with this platform, what will they want from it? And you’re building that out alongside delivering what you need, as a government, which is the ability to interchange that data. That can result in better services for citizens, and better transparency and increasing that trust. And I think that very tangible example is one that’s very relevant to lots of governments around the world.

**SIIM SIKKUT:**  And what’s the beautiful part is that, obviously, there’s a lot of building blocks there to do it. And I mean, that perhaps takes us to another direction, but we have always believed in sharing and reusing. We’ve taken stuff from other governments we’ve seen. We share it back.

So, for example, you know, that’s the easy part where you can take some of our stack, even. You know, we talked about here once-only. It’s powered by X-Road. X-Road is open source out there, for example. Go and take it, try it, play it. And you know, if it works, build with it.

So, if you start along this journey today, it’s so much easier because there’s so much stuff to build on, as a solution, as a policy, learning as a principle.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So, that leads very nicely into my next question, if you were starting a digital transformation in a government now, if you were to leave Estonia, move to a country which was very early in its journey, starting from some very analog approaches, where would you start? If you were looking around the world, what pieces would you take and how would you get going?

**SIIM SIKKUT:**  There is a plentitude of best practice out there. I always admire those folks who start boldly and new, because you can skip a few decades, right. And that’s – obviously, where also companies like Microsoft, by the way, come in because a lot of, the product suites and knowledge is also available that wasn’t available back in the day for us through you.

So, long story short, there’s so much to learn from and pick and build from. But the two things there that won’t change, one thing is in every country, the burning platform is different and the problems you start with are different. So, if I had to give only one piece of advice, it’s to say that where do you start? Start with whatever is the biggest pain for your citizens. Some countries, it’s taxation. Some countries, it’s how to register for some benefits, whatever.

Fix those pain points, even if you don’t fix them with perfect platforms right now, immediately, but at least to start fixing. You start the journey. And then have a strategy on the side in terms of building up sustainable platforms and infrastructure, and the whole design approach, and everything at the same time.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** I think there’s a very realistic answers and good places for people to start thinking about and getting started. And so, when you think about coming back into Estonia, the strength of the position that you’re in now with the foundations that you’ve got in place, where do you see Estonia going next? What are you going to be doing over the next five years that we’re going to see and be excited about, coming from Estonia?

**SIIM SIKKUT:**  Well, we have already hinted in our chat on a few things. A lot about, for us, in the last few years has been to start and try and experiment with certain directions, be it AI optic in government, be it the invisible or proactive services we talked about built around life events, . It’s about, again, this sort of user centricity and service focus to the whole of government. these, we had to scale out fully, deliver fully. So, a lot of the strategy for the next years is built around that.

But if I had to bring as a highlight in terms of what we have a lot of hopes for the longer future is that we have this very clear vision that interface for the future will be virtual assistants that we use for voice. It’s the Siris, it’s the Google Assistants, it’s the Cortanas in Microsoft. It’s whatever is right in our devices that we use daily. And we are trying to build out that all of our government information and services would be available through these virtual assistants.

In the interim time, it might be through, I don’t know, an app that we provide as a government. But in the end, we had to build out the interoperability of this ecosystem of bots and AI agents all the way to private sector interfaces.

So, that sort of stuff is what we have been trying to start experiment now. That sort of roadmap is what we have laid out. And this is what we’re most excited about, is that we see through the first pilot work, it can be done. So, if you, come to us in two or three years, I think we will be already in building that future practically out. It will be available for our users in Estonia, at least in Estonia language, which is another trickle in the game.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** One of the fantastic things about Estonia is you have leadership from people just like you who are willing to think about what’s next, and keep pushing forward with that, and aren’t satisfied with what we’ve got right now. So, I am really excited to see how this evolves over the next couple of years.

Just one final question from me, and we like to ask this from everybody on the podcast. What we want to do here is celebrate the work of public servants around the world who often don’t get much light shone on the fantastic day-to-day work that they do. Is there anything that you’ve seen in other countries that you are particularly impressed by or interested by, and you would recommend people who are listening to this go and check out and learn a little bit more about?

**SIIM SIKKUT:**  There’s a range of things. I think there’s a range of brilliant colleagues around the world. And I think it sort of works on two levels. If I look sort of big picture, the whole of digital government point of view, then there’s clearly one group, . And so, basically, these are the CIOs, CDOs, heads of digital agencies, right, to whom we often gather with in a sort of AA setting, as I like to say, right – (laughter) – a digital nation’s group or OECD, and so forth. And second, it has, obviously, a lot of great innovators on various stuff, concrete actual working level, building and disrupting their domain with their solutions, be it health or otherwise.

But if I were to bring out a few names, because I know that this is what you’re after, I’ve been very impressed with what has been recently happening in places like Australia, what they have done also in the way of COVID and using that is actually making some change happen.

I’ve been very impressed always with what Denmark’s up to, classically, because we learned a lot of tricks from them, how to really, you know, change the game from citizen point of view. Brazil is doing amazing stuff in Latin America. There’s stuff happening always, in Singapore from tech point of view, because they are excellent in using, tech to the latest of the game.

I’m doing an injustice to many more, but there’s quite a few folks like that to start with. I believe that nobody going to be the best at everything. This is the law of economics, right? It’s comparative advantage stuff. So, you have to go out and see what sort of somebody is good at something, and then pick and choose from that, and build your stack and services on.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** I think that’s fantastic. There are so many really good examples out there. So, thank you for highlighting those. And I’m sure that people you didn’t name will not be offended by this. (Laughter.) Force you to be undiplomatic.

**SIIM SIKKUT:**  (Laughter.) I hope so, I hope so.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So, that is all we have time for. Thank you so much, Siim, for joining us today and sharing some of your lessons and your guidance to people who are starting or continuing on their own journeys. Being part of this community and hearing those voices are really important, I think, for people to not feel like they’re doing this alone, that there are a community of other people who are making these journeys alongside them around the world. So, thank you for being a part of that, and good luck in all that you are continuing to do.

**SIIM SIKKUT:**  Thank you. And let’s build the future.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Absolutely. Thank you.

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Thank you to our guest, Siim Sikkut, and thank you to you for joining me today on Public Sector Future. If you’d like to learn more about Estonia and their approach to digital government, all the links will be available on our show page.

Our goal is for you to learn something new and be inspired to think differently about your own digital journey. If you’ve enjoyed today’s episode and want to help others find it, please share, rate and review the show. It really does help people find and discover new shows like this one. And remember to listen and subscribe to the show wherever you get your podcasts. Check out our show page for links of all of what was discussed today and visit us at wwps.microsoft.com.

We encourage you to reach out. Please do send your questions and your feedback. You can find me on Twitter @LivNeal or on LinkedIn, or you can e-mail us at Ask-PS@microsoft.com. Thank you. And see you next time.

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