

Public Sector Future podcast
EP10 – Digital Transformation at Scale
Guest: Jacky Wright
Transcript

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Running time: 23:45

Talent:

- 1. Olivia Neal [host]**
- 2. Jacky Wright [guest]**

[Music]

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 delivering change. We meet the people behind the stories, hear their first-hand experiences, and their lessons learned.

Throughout the series, we discuss technology and trends as well as the cultural aspects of change.

I'm joined today by Jacky Wright. Jacky is the chief digital officer and corporate vice president in Microsoft U.S. She rejoined Microsoft in 2019 after spending two years on secondment to Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, the U.K.'s tax and customs department, where she was their chief digital and information officer.

Having worked in both public and private leadership roles, Jacky is passionate about using her platform to drive digital transformation for an organization's own objectives, but also for social, economic, and environmental change.

As a woman of color, her passion, advocacy, and influence to create a truly inclusive world is demonstrated in the various forums where she regularly speaks on diversity, digital inclusion, and the power of inclusive leadership.

Today, we're going to talk about Jacky's experience as the chief digital and information officer at Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs, how to build a digital organization at scale, and how to secure the people, talent, and culture to deliver the best outcomes. Jacky, welcome to the show.

OLIVIA NEAL: Well, thank you so much for being here. I actually know a bit about HMRC, because it was my very first job straight out of university was in HMRC

But maybe for people who don't have the context on what HMRC is and the scale of the challenges you're facing, could you just give us a little bit of background on the organization and what your role was?

JACKY WRIGHT: If you think about the tax authority, this was everything from tax collection revenue and customs. So, it included not just the tax portion, but also the customs, borders collections, and declaration systems.

Taxpayers, about 32 million taxpayers in the U.K., collecting over 600 billion pounds' worth of receipts. An internal organization of about 60,000 employees spread out through the U.K. Really, my role as the chief digital information officer was a combination of the IT responsibilities, but also the digital and transformational aspects of the organization. So, how do we transform who we are, how we serve our citizens, and how we improve what we do and how we do it.

OLIVIA NEAL: So, that was the combination of the digital approaches coming together with a much wider overall transformation of an organization as well.

JACKY WRIGHT: Yes, exactly right.

JACKY WRIGHT: Well, as a CIO, the first thing that you usually want to do is understand if there were any risks in the organization or any exposure. So, firstly, you look at the landscape, you understand, do we have any exposures? Are there things that we should be focused on? Then, you take an approach that says, “How do I learn where we are from an overall organization perspective, our infrastructure, our environment? How do I understand my employees, who I have?” Then, as I interact with the exco and the rest of the organization, how do I get a pulse on the culture of the organization and how the top table operates to be able to make sure that I am part of driving the right culture and strategy and approach?

OLIVIA NEAL: So, you really thought there about the pulse both at the leadership level then all the way through down into the organization of 60,000 people.

JACKY WRIGHT: That’s exactly right. And it’s an important point, because whether you’re in public or private industry, the key is to make sure that you understand how things get done, you understand the charter at hand, and you understand the barriers and processes relative to the cultural environment that either enables your ability to get done what needs to get done or inhibits your ability.

OLIVIA NEAL: And were there any particular areas that you identified as priorities to then start tackling?

JACKY WRIGHT: Yes. And I would start from a collaboration perspective. When I joined, we were not using collaboration tools. And so, we didn’t have a Skype or a Teams at all. We had them, but they were not used. That was an important part of engendering a culture and creating a culture by which you can collaborate in a more seamless way.

And so, that was the first approach that I worked with the chairman to say, “Hey, we need to do this really quickly, because in order for us to really build on this culture, this culture of collaborating and being inclusive, we need the tools to be able to do that.”

So, that was the initial – focusing on how can we create a collaborative environment?

The second priority was getting a handle on the envelope The spend envelope, what it includes, what it doesn’t include, and how where we are today, fits into the overall agenda that I need to come up with, which is a charter around how we’re going to transform this organization.

The third priority was really about spending time learning the business and understanding and learning the people. So, for me, I’ve worked in many different corporations, but I’ve never worked in a tax authority. So, just understanding the citizen lifecycle, understanding fraud, understanding all the things – making tax digital that was working and really doing a good job on the front end. How does that all fit together?

To me, this 30-, 60-, 90-day plan around coming up with an overall charter of how we’re going to strategically transform the business. Understanding the health of the environment. Again, from an IT perspective, do we have the foundation to be able to then build on something that will help us transform and be an agile organization?

So, you know, just a few priorities as you think about transforming a company, public or private, at scale.

OLIVIA NEAL: And I think that environment you were operating in, you gave us a bit of a sense of that scale. So, you mentioned over 600 billion in tax receipts, the tax and the customs and some outgoing payments as well and particularly at that time in the UK, a changing political context which is through – most governments at any point at any time, where you're dealing with political influences in the UK as well.

JACKY WRIGHT: Absolutely. The one thing I didn't mention, Brexit. So, Brexit was part of it as well. So, we're talking about, you know, moving the bus while you're taking wheels off the bus, but the bus moving at pace and how are you going to ensure that what you're doing from a replacing perspective doesn't derail the course of action for certain things?

OLIVIA NEAL: And so, the team that you had around you and the team that you built up must have been really important in helping you move forward and helping you achieve those objectives. How did you think about the types of talent that you wanted to grow in the organization and to attract to be part of the civil service?

JACKY WRIGHT: So, a couple of things when people think about tax, you get the visceral reaction of what tax is, right? So, creating the story around why come to HMRC was an important branding thing which, you know, in the public sector is not something you naturally think of, but it's something that's needed.

You come into an organization that is looking to transform, use the best-of-breed tools, think about how to really transform how you interact with citizens, and really being a leader in transformation.

So, utilizing and creating this brand of HMRC externally to attract talent is one. You also, wanted to make sure that the people that you have in the organization feel that they can be part of something bigger and greater. So, really focusing on as you think about tools such as AI, machine learning, etc., how do you bring the organization along? What's the learning path to create, upskill, and reskill people who, you know, average tenure in some instances are 30 years? But the ability to create an environment where they can learn.

And then really, identify key talent, whether they're outside or inside, that can really go deep, engage at the right levels, really focus on culture, can really partner with the business, and then really operate through ambiguity.

OLIVIA NEAL: I think there's a couple of really important points that you brought up which I think are linked – the ability to operate through ambiguity. Because if there's one thing that's certain in a public-sector environment, it is that change is going to be constant.

Having that skill and also that ongoing ability to learn throughout a career that you identified there. Because I think in the public sector for a long time, we've put a lot of emphasis on frontloading learning, on people coming in with degrees, and master's, and MBA's and having all of that at the beginning of their career. But now with so many rapid changes, the ability to learn throughout a career is what people and organizations to help them develop

JACKY WRIGHT: Absolutely. And the key there is the ability to adapt and learn and constantly and continuously do that.

OLIVIA NEAL: Were there any new trainings that you thought would be particularly useful for people in your teams where you were encouraging them to build their expertise and skills?

JACKY WRIGHT: So, there are a couple of areas. One is, when you think about all the data that HMRC has, how do we harness the power of that data to help improve what we do? Whether it be understanding policy changes that are fit for purpose because you understand the demographics of the society or whether it be fraud

protection way up front versus being an afterthought and being at the back end but mitigating up front so that the ability to reduce fraud along the journey is there.

And so, this notion of AI and machine learning, the power of data, and creating a data culture was paramount. Again, in an organization where data can be its greatest risk or its greatest asset, what are the things you need to do? Every individual has to understand their responsibility relative to the data that is kept at HMRC.

And this notion of at a government department, the uses, and really understanding to improve services, that was at the core I think, if you ask me, from not just a technology, but when you think about HMRC and how best and better you can become in serving your constituents and society, understanding that was critical.

OLIVIA NEAL: And I think what you said there really hits on the whole range of opportunities and activities that HMRC undertakes. Because as you said, it's not just the areas like technology it's policymaking as well, and these pieces that often we don't associate with digital transformation.

JACKY WRIGHT: This notion of digital transformation, again, people pivot to technology and it's not necessarily technology. I mean, you can look at data, use AI and machine learning to recognize that small and medium businesses is the fastest-growing companies– so, how does policy create economic opportunity to be able to create more of these small and medium businesses?

And so, how do you feed that back into the policy-making processes? That's transformation at the core with digital enabling it. What better way to do that?

OLIVIA NEAL: Yeah, and really bringing in that full range of people to their conversations to see the benefits.

And so, it sounds like during the time when you were in this role, working in the public sector can often be a stressful environment, particularly when you've got a changing political environment, you've got deadlines to meet, you've got rising, expectations of to be able to transact with government online. A lot of changes within an organization. What did you do in your role to build a culture where people could be supported through that which felt inclusive?

JACKY WRIGHT: So, there are a couple of things here, and let's focus first on my leadership team. What I did with my leadership team and across the exco as well was we brought in some folks who would help us focus on how do you build empathy within an organization? And it starts by building self-awareness. So, how do you as a leader understand who you are, how you interact, the things that you need to do to become more empathetic, and then how do you engender that within the organization?

So, some key learnings in terms of how as a leader you need to be able to do that. The second was around how do we showcase from a community perspective within the organization? And we have many different people in the organization, people who are early in career, those who have been in there a long time. So, how do you create – and remember, the tools for collaboration enable this now, where you can showcase, hey, we've got someone who is just coming out of university, who's on the program, who is now working in policy. Here's what they're learning in policy. Let's learn a little bit about them. We've got somebody else who's been in the department for 30 years. Let's showcase them. What has their career journey been?

And so, this notion of learning about others' lived experiences and bringing that to the forefront, creating these postcards and these storyboards within a business or within a culture – paramount. Really important in terms of helping people understand what they could be, who they could be, who they have working with them, and that

notion of building that empathetic muscle and a culture where everyone feels included from all aspects and walks of life. That was the second.

The third was pan-government. How does HMRC influence everything from hiring, make sure we have the right capabilities, working better with private sector? Because, again, this notion of you can't infuse capability all the time, but you've got to be able to get it where you need it. And are we working with our suppliers in the right way? Do they bring the right capabilities to bear? Do we have the right partnerships? Are we improving how we work better?

Another way, as we look and work with head of talent management for the department and more broadly for government, what are some of the things we need to focus on? I also sat on this cross-sector, cross-government committee on diversity, which was all about how do we create and more diverse government? What are the things we need to do there?

So, various – everything from, you know, building my leadership team, creating inclusivity by helping people understand and their lived experiences, how do we work cross-government to create that as well? Many aspects.

OLIVIA NEAL: And these are things which have impact over a long period of time. I think you won't necessarily have seen all the benefits just in the period you were there. Did you have any way of measuring whether these were successful?

JACKY WRIGHT: Well, besides anecdotally people coming to me and telling me that yes Jacky, you did (inaudible) I think it's fair to say you can see some of the changes relative to how we partner better with private sector. One, the identification that diverse talent should be brought in or cultivated and developed. I was, you know, the only Black female DG, which also, you know, has a responsibility, I had a job to play a key role across government to help people understand, hey, this is what diversity looks like in one way and here's how we can develop leaders and et cetera.

So, I feel you and I see that there's recognition that changes need to be made in different ways. As we think about the digital landscape and how HMRC has evolved through the pandemic, utilizing Teams to create remote working, that would not have occurred if I had not forced us to really, then, use these tools to be able to help us from a remote working perspective.

So, the ways of working have dramatically changed. Meetings are held and conducted at scale utilizing tools. So, I think there are many proof points relative to what's going on. , I launched a whole program about securing our technical future, which was about creating the right foundation. That continues today and is definitely one of the bigger spending envelopes that HMRC has, but it really is about creating the foundation to be able to be an agile digital organization. So, I think there are many proof points.

OLIVIA NEAL: And I think those foundational elements that you put into place, and also people in the roles before you and around you have put into place have really come into their own over the last year. The ability of HMRC to be able to adapt during the pandemic and continue to function. If it didn't have those foundations in place, this wouldn't have been possible.

And so, you mentioned in your previous answer working across-public and private sector. And I think you had this really interesting experience where you've worked deeply in both of those sectors, which is not actually as common as we might think. Do you think that there are lessons for people in the public sector that they can learn from the private sector and vice versa?

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JACKY WRIGHT: Absolutely. I'll use a prime example. You know, I worked with Tech U.K. to create somewhat of a hackathon, but it really was about taking people from the public sector and the private sector to work together on solving problems. really coming up with what are some of the innovative ways that we can solve some of the problems in the public sector?

What that highlighted more broadly that this need for partnership is critical. Infusing talent with capabilities on the outside that you can't get in government is something that is sorely needed, and it's recognized and how can we best do that? That is one.

But also, having folks in the public sector go and do secondments and time in the private to bring some of those best practices in also. I think it's definitely a need and definitely something that – whether it's the U.K. government or any other government, this notion of working together in public and private sector for the purposes of better outcomes is needed.

If you look at standards, if you look at how government needs to work better with the private sector on things such as cybersecurity, the need for collaboration, private-public – it's needed now more than ever.

OLIVIA NEAL: So, we talked about some of the areas where public and private sector could work together better as an ecosystem. Are there any areas in relation to policymaking where public and private sector could work better together?

JACKY WRIGHT: Absolutely. I'd use two as an example. One is as we think about ethics and as we evolve to be more digitally inclusive, utilizing tools where, you know, potential for inherent biases and we need to think about it in a different way, government and private sector need to play a key role together in defining standards and working on how best to do that.

Then, the second relates to trade. Now, where the pandemic has highlighted this need for collaboration across governments to improve supply chains, to improve how we trade. What better way using technology in a digital mindset? That is an area that both public and private sector need to also embrace relative to standards, relative to how you set policy, to ensure, again, from a global perspective that we're doing the right thing.

OLIVIA NEAL: Okay, that's interesting. Thank you. And I really like that emphasis on coming together across countries as well as sectors to look at that.

JACKY WRIGHT: That's right.

OLIVIA NEAL: For a final question to wrap up, one of the things that we're interested in in this area is understanding the interesting work that's going on in public sector environments, organizations around the world.

You've moved back into a role in the U.S. now. Are there any examples of public-sector organizations which you think are doing interesting and exciting work at the moment, which would be worth people being aware of and checking out?

JACKY WRIGHT: The one thing I would characterize that I think is really interesting that we in the public sector really need to embrace is accessibility. if you think about a citizen and how – you're able to interact with any public agency, it requires you to be digitally adept, because we're not going back.

And so, this notion of ensuring that everyone can participate, everyone can contribute, and everyone can do what they need to do as it relates to interacting with the public sector, accessibility is at the core.

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And we as the public sector, should be embracing accessibility and the tools that enable each and everybody to participate. There are some really exciting tools that are out there now, and that is the opportunity for public sector – one of many, but I think that one is key.

OLIVIA NEAL: Fantastic. Well, thank you, Jacky, very much for joining us.

JACKY WRIGHT: All right, thank you.

[Music]

OLIVIA NEAL: Thank you to our guest, Jacky Wright. And thank you to you for joining me today on Public Sector Future.

Our goal is for you to learn something new and be inspired to think differently about your own journey. If you enjoyed today's episode and want to help other people find it, please share, rate, and review the show. It really does help people discover new shows like this one.

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Please do reach out. Send us your questions and feedback. You can find me on Twitter [@LivNeal](https://twitter.com/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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