**Public Sector Future podcast**

**Episode 24**

**Olivia Neal [host]**

**HE Huda Al Hashimi [guest] Deputy Minister of Cabinet Affairs for Strategic Affairs**

**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. Throughout the series we discuss technology and trends, as well as the culture aspects of how to make change happen.

I’m joined today by Her Excellency Huda AlHashimi, the Deputy Minister of Cabinet Affairs for Strategic affairs in the Government of the United Arab Emirates. As part of her role she also leads the Mohammed Bin Rashid Center for Government Innovation

As you’ll hear in our discussion, Her Excellency Huda has been leading new approaches to stimulate and embed innovation within government, testing different methods of delivering results to address cross-government challenges. This has proven the value of some very replicable models which I’m sure other public sector organizations will want to learn more about. So without further ado, Your Excellency Huda AlHashimi, welcome to the show.

**HE HUDA AL HASHIMI:** Thank you for having me today and it’s really an honor, great opportunity to be here to share the UAE story with your audience.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Well, maybe to start off with, could you just give us a bit of context on what your role is and what you and your team are aiming to achieve?

**HE HUDA AL HASHIMI:** So I have a unique role. I am responsible for strategic affairs at the Ministry of Cabinet. So I’m the deputy minister there, which really essentially means that me and my team, we lead and are responsible for two main things. One is articulating the leadership’s vision, setting ambitious, short, medium, and long-term strategies and agendas for the nation. And secondly, is making sure that the government actually delivers on that ambitious agenda.

I’m not sure most of you all know, but the UAE is a country that was – is quite young. We were established in 1971 from a very humble beginning. But our leadership’s vision for the future of the country and the belief that we can be leaders and drive growth and change has really resulted in what you see today.

In essence, our responsibility, together with my team, is to ensure that this vision and this belief of achieving the impossible is really enshrined in everything that we do, both as a government through our plans, policies, and ultimately the culture of our governments as well.

I also am fortunate to lead the Mohammed bin Rashid Centre for Government Innovation. This center is part of the prime minister’s office, and we are responsible for building an innovative capability across government and for really ensuring that government entities apply innovation across everything that they do.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So it’s very clearly coming through that innovation is a major focus for the government in the UAE. Why do you think that is and what are you doing to help drive success in that area?

**HE HUDA AL HASHIMI:** So last year, the UAE celebrated its 50 year anniversary since its establishment. Our leaders always dreamed of great things – for their land and their people. And most of the time, these dreams are quite ambitious.

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A lot of people were quite skeptical on some of these ambitious projects. So example, why – why invest so strongly in digital infrastructure for schools? This was something that we did almost 15 years ago and people question that high capacity investment.

Another question was, why diversify our economy to new industries 40 years ago when we are an oil rich country? Another question people ask was, why have a space mission and send a probe to Mars?

In essence, what I’m trying to say in a very long way is that innovation has been a critical part of what the UAE has been from the start. And if we were going to do things the traditional way, it was really going to take us a very long time to catch up to other countries. So our ambitions were not just to catch up, but really to – to leapfrog.

At first, innovation was driven directly by our leadership as they touched every institution, project, and employee. But as the government grew from a few hundred people to tens of thousands it is today, it really became important to institutionalize innovation within governments.

Innovation, in essence, is really about creating agility, robust government models and resilient societies. And we saw more than ever how important agility and readiness was in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. We’re also pretty proud of how well the UAE was able to get through that pandemic with minimal disruption to health, livelihood, and business as well.

In 2014, the government announced its setup of the Mohammed bin Rashid Centre for Government Innovation. And it was by design that the center was incubated within His Highness’s the Prime Minister’s office itself. And really it’s because to spearhead the drive for innovation across the public sector and not for it to be just a fad, but for it to be institutionalized as well. And years later, we’re still going strong.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** I think what you’re saying there is really interesting, talking about that institutionalizing innovation and making it something that really is at the heart of public service. Often it’s these cultural challenges in government that are as difficult to move forward on or maybe more difficult than some of the technology type challenges that we see.

**HE HUDA AL HASHIMI:** I totally agree with you, Olivia. I mean, one of the early things that we did when we started the center was to distinguish the myth of what innovation means. And it was tough journey because you’re talking with an impression that innovation is just for scientists. It’s not for government, it’s for R&D centers. It’s for an elite group of people.

And what we were trying to do is break that barriers to actually say, no, innovation is an everyday practice in government. Innovation is for those who are facing the customers. They need to be innovative in how they deal with challenges on a day-to-day basis. Innovation is for leaders who have to think of ways to achieve more with less budget. Innovation is for policymakers to think of how they look at analysis of evidence based on numbers.

So it was that misconception that it was just about technology and it was just for a few, and that’s really what we’ve been trying to do a lot in – in the Mohammed bin Rashid Centre for Government Innovation is to look at three main aspects. One is experimentation. Allowing government to experiment is a tough ask. I mean, you’re telling government to take risks when by default they’re designed not to take risk. They’re designed to be very process oriented. But here we’re telling them, no, take calculated risk, pilot, fail small, but at least you’ve tried and most of the times, you’ll achieve big. So that was one big element is the experimentation mindset.

The second one was about enablement. It’s easy to say that, you know, everybody can innovate, but a lot of people ask, but how? Give us the tools. Give us the knowledge. So very early on, we pushed the agenda of creating this new role in government, the role of chief innovation officers, and that was about having every single ministry and federal authority assigning a role to spearhead this agenda through, to be the creators of change in this – in this pathway.

So with those group of people, we trained them through a public sector innovation diploma program for a year. It wasn’t an easy job to take on. It’s not a nice title without – without the sweat. So these guys spearheaded that through and they created mini teams and that ripple effect happened across government as well.

But along with just training CIOs, we did a full view program to actually enable government by providing research, best practices, methodology from private sector reports, but also MOOCs and – and just trying to find many different tools and avenues for them to have access to knowledge and access to new things that are happening in innovation.

Because innovation, as we all know, is not stagnant. Something that was innovative five years ago is probably the norm today. So hence, what is the new aspect today? That’s what we’re looking at as well.

The third one, which is probably – and you referred to it in your question, which is the hardest part is culture. How do you shift the culture? How do you get people to embrace this – this program? And that’s something that we’ve done through many different areas. I’ll talk about it a bit more, but one of the most exciting one was to actually create a festival, which is called Innovation Month.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So you’ve got three really important areas there, experimentation, enablement, and culture, which are all coming together. And I think the example of the diploma program for the chief innovation officers is so interesting. I don’t think I’ve talked to anybody in any of the countries which we work with who have got such a rigorous approach to training up leaders in innovation and then keeping them current.

So looking a little bit more at the specifics of how you’re making some of these things happen, I know that one of the areas that you’ve been working on is a program of government accelerators. Could you tell us a little bit more about that program?

**HE HUDA AL HASHIMI:** So one of the things like with the government accelerators program is actually it was derived out of an innovation to help get things done. So it’s interesting, people think that it was just a program because it was thought through and it was actually based on a specific need. We had a couple of years ago, we had our Vision 2021 and it was this very ambitious targets were set, as usual, to achieve and very little time as well.

And when we were gauging, because we have a strong KPI system across government so we could see how well we’re doing with these metrics. In 2016, we paused and we realized that things aren’t moving as fast as we would like in some domains. There’s a lot of challenges in those areas. And we realized that innovation is definitely an important tool that will help push that through. But it’s more than that. A government needs a platform to speed up areas.

And so we went and we learned, like all the others, we went to San Francisco. We learned. We went to Silicon Valley. We saw some of the startup accelerators there. We got inspired by them. We loved the cohort aspect that they come in, in a few months, and then they exit either being a company, but there was very clear targets set and it was very time bound. So those inspirations, with many other examples we looked at, was the creation of the government accelerators.

So in essence what it is, it’s setting very strong, clear targets to achieve in 100 days. And how do you achieve that is by getting things done rather than planning. There’s that essence of a crisis mode happening, but also essence of removing the fat, removing the bureaucracy, getting whoever is relevant to make that target happen on the table, and working through a design, creative methodology, using innovative tools to get the projects done. And really, that’s what it is.

So we were fortunate that the center was already established for two years. So we learned a lot from the innovative tools that we were pushing down that way, and we used that in practice, but in this space. This space is actually a physical space, it was in a retail space originally. It’s open for all the government players to come in.

We did cohorts of eight challenges of 100 days. We set very clear targets. So example, these targets are not easy to achieve. In fact, they were the hardest ones that were stuck in government. An example of that is reducing traffic deaths by 20% in 100 days’ time compared to the same statistics a year ago. Other example was actually enacting a VC law in 100 days, a law in hundred days, and not something easy to achieve. Another one was, for example, is reducing the time needed to do a basic need of humans is the birth certificate, which used to take seven different visits to government and weeks and weeks of time and effort.

So tangible programs that people could sense and feel, we brought them into the accelerator and we told them one thing: innovate, create, cut down the barriers, work together as a team, collaborate and you have 100 days. You have no excuse. You don’t have extra budget, you have less time, but you need to achieve this task that you set out, and we’re timing you, but we’re also supporting you with many different tools.

So when we did, just maybe if I give you one example, is with the road traffic deaths, this is a national KPI that was stuck. It wasn’t budging. The targets that they wanted to set, the team in charge, was like 10% reduction. And that also they said we need X millions of budget. We told them, you have no budget and you need to reduce it by 20%. In 100 days’ time, they achieved 60% reduction – 60% reduction. And they themselves were shocked by those numbers because 15 different entities came together, not one. The ambulance, the police, the engineers, the municipalities, the local governments, the media campaign, they all came together and they tried over 20 different innovative actual programs in 100 days’ time. Not all worked, but the ones that worked have been now scaled up as business as usual.

So this is sort of a nice example of speeding up delivery, so people feel the sense of achievement, but at the same time, honestly, giving the space for governments to innovate and to actually get things done. And when they see the results, they get encouraged to do more.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So you created a type of crisis environment by bringing those teams together, giving them very clear, very measurable targets, and a time bound period to do this work in and didn’t give them any extra money. But – so it was really just that – that bringing the different entities together, pressuring them to work together, that really drove and encouraged them to get to those results.

**HE HUDA AL HASHIMI:** Yeah, I mean, there’s – there’s no magic to – to it, to be honest. There’s no money pumped into it. It’s as simple as that. And it’s now been six years and 50 challenges gone through, seven cohorts. The latest one was getting all the government to agree on the net zero 2050 target and putting a set plan in place.

And one of the things that we noticed is that there’s a lot of interest in this, which we didn’t realize because we were looking at it for our needs as UAE government. But we realized that this is something that could be easily shared with – with other countries as well, and we’ve done that, and we’re proud to say that there’s government accelerators in the government of Jordan, the government of Uzbekistan. It’s being taught in Harvard to mayors across North America.

So this is something that honestly, we want to just share the knowledge, share the best practice, and if others governments can benefit from that, why not? It’s – it’s just an amazing thing to see that.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And I’m sure that there’s also another benefit of bringing these people together, even just for those 100 days, when they then go back to their own departments and their own teams, it’s become more normal for them to reach out and to share data and to work across boundaries that they might have felt were there previously. So do you start to see some – some knock-on effects where you’re starting to drive other collaboration as well?

**HE HUDA AL HASHIMI:** It’s the beauty of seeing it run for so many years is that you see people talk the same language. They have the same passion. We realize that there was originally when we started this, nobody wanted to join it, because it’s a tough thing to join and put yourself out there and you could easily fail, and 100 days, people are looking at you. But we now actually have a queue of challenges and wanting to come through this program. And we then started to do a diploma program for this as well, so that we can share this knowledge to many different people.

With private sector less so you have that issue of hierarchy. In government you tend to have that. Any government around the world you have, you know, the person who is in – in a unit, probably is not allowed to speak to an undersecretary. And with this accelerator, there’s no titles. It’s really who is relevant to get the thing done. And with that, you eliminate barriers, but you also finds stars. That’s the beauty of this.

The ministers that come to these to this platform and – and here they team up, they probably didn’t get a chance to hear that shining star who’s working on an X department or who probably never got a chance to talk. But with the accelerator, that shining star is actually now presenting to them. And – and actually, really some of these individuals who came through the accelerator have really their career has jumped up and they’ve really become leaders in what they’re doing as well.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So you’re really getting visibility and I’m sure that helps with retention as well in a climate where it’s so competitive to get the best people into public service.

**HE HUDA AL HASHIMI:** Yeah, it’s definitely talent is the key to any success of any program in any company. So if you have it, you need to keep it. You need to nurture it. You need to grow it as well.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** The work that the center is doing, it’s not just achieving the goals of each individual project or program. It’s really changing the fabric and the way that the public sector operates. And I think that brings in agility and resilience and means that when something like the pandemic happens, you as a government are able to respond more quickly. You’ve got the right foundations in place, you’ve got the right technology, but you’ve also got the right culture. You’ve got people who can solve problems in a timebound manner and see results quickly. So it must have set you up well in that situation and for future situations, too.

**HE HUDA AL HASHIMI:** Yeah. I mean, for sure. In 2012, there was a program called the Smart Learning Program. We wanted all of our public schools to have access to the right infrastructure, and the right soft infrastructure and hard infrastructure to be able to manage a digital transformation. That was 2012. There was no urgency then. A large investment was put into making that program.

We felt the benefits of that in the pandemic, that not a single child was off school for a single day. Their transition from physical to virtual was so smooth and so immediate, that nobody said, pause.

And so these are some of the things, the early on investments in government of digital transformation. When people asked, why are you investing so heavily in these programs, you reap the benefits of it today. It wasn’t catch-up. It was a very smooth transition.

Similarly, with our court systems, I mean, there was a lot of resistance to move into a digital court hearing. But with the pandemic, there was no choice. We couldn’t pause the work. You couldn’t pause life. You had to continue because there was no idea how long this would take. Nobody had the answer of how long this pandemic would take or how long people would be in lockdown and so forth. Thankfully, the UAE had a very short lockdown process, but that encouraged the fact that you can go digital, the fact that you can do a court hearing digital meant why go back? Continue this. So a very clear mandate was given was that all court hearings that are of small, there was a specific criteria set of value, now are only to be done virtual. They’re not to be done physical.

Another very bold mandate that was done that 50% of our customer care centers that were physical need to be shut down. They all need to move into a virtual world. So a lot of the things that with the unfortunate scenario of the pandemic made us move to a digital transformation even faster than we had anticipated. People adopted it faster, people absorbed it faster, they saw the benefits of it right hand, and I think there’s no going back after that.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So you mentioned that this program of the government accelerators has been running for six years now and has grown in its success. Is there anything that you’ve learned along the way which would help other people who might look at this and say, oh, I’d love to try this in my own government? Are there any lessons that you would share for people?

**HE HUDA AL HASHIMI:** Yeah. I mean, an important lesson that I’ve learned always is that you can’t sit on success for long. To be honest, one of the defining characteristics on how the UAE really operates is how quickly we evolve the approaches we use to drive results.

I mentioned the innovation example. Every year, we change the curriculum because you can’t be stagnant in what you think. It could have been highly successful in 2015, but totally irrelevant now. So this is something that always keeps us on our toes. And some might say this is disruptive and difficult to manage to constantly change, but honestly, we – we celebrate disruption.

So example the framework that the UAE government currently uses to plan and deliver. I mean, one of the lessons I’ve learned is that we were always told that we need to plan long term. So we used to be three years planning cycles. We moved to five year. We have a very strong 50-year agenda as well. And – but last year, we introduced something different. We introduced short term, six month to one-year programs that need to be transformative and have impacts and results very quickly.

So I guess this might sound contradictory to some that at one hand, we’re really thinking long term, but on the other hand, we’re looking for fast results. But really, the job requires the ability to always work in the space of opposites. This is what I’ve learned over the years is that we do need to have long term strategy setting, but we also need to show short term impact today. And it’s also equally important to celebrate. With the pandemic, we realize every short, small success, every small achievement is something that should be really cheered. And it doesn’t mean we’re only celebrating success, but we’re celebrating people taking risks, people making change as well.

And that is why we have this program that – we’ve started early on in 2015 called the UAE Innovates Festival. And we celebrate it every month in February where we ask the whole of the country, to really celebrate what innovation means to them and to celebrate what they’ve achieved so far. And this is really it’s been going strong every year. It’s one of the largest celebrations of innovation globally that I’m aware of. And it really brings communities together. It’s quite public. It’s actually open and in the parks and in malls and –in areas that people could really see and benefit from.

Because one of the things we’ve also learned, it’s not just about celebrating and patting on the back, but it’s also about learning, because the more we showcase, the more we learn, and the more we don’t have to start from scratch.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And you mentioned that the work that you’re doing is of a lot of interest to people around the world. Are there other countries who you look to for inspiration? Are there other countries who you think are doing excellent work on innovation or digital transformation that you get inspired by?

**HE HUDA AL HASHIMI:** I actually attended the session of your chairman at Davos, and he totally inspired me with the way he talked about how he’s managing people. And with the COVID, it’s all about empathy and it’s about retaining talent. And I think that’s a truly important aspect because very early on, you said digital transformation can happen easily, but cannot happen if you don’t have the people behind it. So if anything, the most important element across all of this is having a very strong, happy and healthy workforce that will drive the change. And really, that’s something that we’re going to put more and more attention to going forward.

One of the things that I’ve realized, especially when it comes to the role I play, is that the inspiration sometimes comes from an industry totally unrelated to where you are. So I’m very conscious not to look at just government when it comes to inspiration. I’m very conscious to look at very different industries.

For example, I’m very curious with what’s happening in the world of virtual assets and how interesting people are trying to navigate the risks, people are trying to navigate the governance, people are trying to navigate the transformation of that and how digital transformation is playing a big role there as well with how we’re disrupting what currency means.

Obviously, you have the usual countries that are the forefront with digital transformation, Estonia being one, Singapore being one as well. And these are usually countries that we’re always regularly inspired because they constantly change as well and they’re constantly pushing boundaries as well.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And I think one of the wonderful things about that digital transformation space with government is that I think the governments who are doing it best are very open about what they’re doing. And you said earlier, you know, when you don’t have to start from scratch, you can go so much faster. And if you’re aiming to leapfrog, that’s the only way to do it.

**HE HUDA AL HASHIMI:** Yeah, I mean, everybody’s talking about the metaverse. And the question we have to ask ourselves is, what does that mean in government’s perspective? People worry with governments comes in too early in the sense that they might stop innovation, that they might overregulate, but to be honest, I think government starting early means they understand better, they know how to encourage, and they’ll actually create a better enabling environment and ecosystem to let those industries nurture.

So this is how we’re looking at it in the UAE, is that the more we understand with what’s happening in the digital world and the transformation that’s happening, that’s exponential, and the faster we are in that, the more we are able to actually make this – this new industry prosper.

A few years ago, we had a minister of AI and people questioned, why do you need a minister of AI? But it really is because we know that’s the future and we know if we don’t understand it sooner, we will be playing catch-up. And it’s unfortunate for government to play catch-up. Government needs to be at the same bandwidth as all the new changes that’s happening around us as well.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Fantastic. Okay, that’s great. Thank you so much for joining us.

**HE HUDA AL HASHIMI:** Thank you.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Thank you to our guest, Her Excellency Huda AlHashimi, and thank you to you for joining me today on Public Sector Future. Our goal is for you to learn something new and to be inspired to think differently about your journey.

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