**Public Sector Future WWPS Podcast**

**Detail: Public Sector Future**

**Episode: TBD**

**Host: Olivia Neal**

**Guest 1: Ashleigh Sinclair**

**Guest 2: Andrew Cooke**

(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 in order to deliver better outcomes.

I’m your host, Olivia Neal. Today we’re going to be talking about one of the really important aspects of digital transformation, how to get the policy settings right. I’m delighted to be joined today by two of the authors of a new paper, looking into the policy and procurement building blocks for successful digital transformation in governments, available on our website. They are Ashleigh Sinclair, of the global law firm Linklaters, and Andrew Cooke, the Head of Policy for Worldwide Public Sector, here at Microsoft.

Together with teams in both organizations Ashleigh and Andrew have been pulling from experience and research around the world they’ve been researching the foundational elements which allow public sector organizations to be successful in their digital transformation journeys, and in our discussion they share some of their lessons learned on where to start.

(Music.)

So, Ashleigh and Andrew, thank you so much for being here with us today. It’s lovely to have you on the podcast.

**ANDREW COOKE:** Pleasure to be here.

**ASHLEIGH SINCLAIR:** Yes, great to be here. Thank you for having me.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Absolutely. Well, Andrew, let’s start with you. Could you tell us a little bit about what made you start looking into this paper? How did you know that this was needed?

**ANDREW COOKE:** I’d been enrolled as the global policy lead within worldwide public sector, I think, for just a month. And I’d been approached by, I think, three or four governments just in that very short space of time, who asked us to share with them our insights into who is doing digital transformation policy well, and why. And I think it was on the fourth approach that sort of made me pause and think, you know, what could we be doing smartly here to engage in a conversation on the topic of digital transformation in the public sector?

I think what resonated sort of internally or what became apparent internally is that Microsoft, very much like Linklaters, have become a global sort of sensor network of sorts, being partners to governments on their cloud and digital transformation journeys. So, our perspectives, whilst sort of coming from a cloud providers viewpoint, were sought. And I think because we brought a difference, and in some ways, uniquely global perspective to the conversation, that’s why governments were coming to us.

We also decided that it would be more appropriate to do – do this in the form of a paper, rather than just have one-on-one engagements as we very much see this as the start of the conversation. So, the building blocks, as we state in the paper, are not meant to be exhaustive. They’re meant to be sort of foundational, and the foundations that we’ve observed as being the catalysts for the public sector communities uptake of technology at scale and pace.

As to why Linklaters, I think that’s a great question. I’ve worked with the Linklaters team for many years.

So, you know, I know that the Linklaters team, like Microsoft is, you know, we’re committed to technology, we’re committed to innovation. And they, therefore, were a natural partner for us to collaborate with on this project, which was helped enormously by their global reach, just like ourselves, and the background of their legal team. So, it wasn’t just necessarily a team of – of lawyers who’ve been in private practice for years, but they have lawyers who’ve been embedded within government, and – and bring those sorts of unique government insights that we’re really keen to reflect in the paper.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Well, I think that really comes through in the paper when you read it, the very global nature of the perspectives, and the firsthand experience that many of the people involved in creating it have had.

And Ashleigh, turning to you, this is clearly a really large topic, when Andrew is talking about how can we help governments understand what foundational elements they need to put in place for a successful digital transformation. There’s so many different pieces there. There’s so many different routes, so many different avenues to explore. How did you come to this structure which you’ve ended up with where you have these eight building blocks?

**ASHLEIGH SINCLAIR:** I think we take the analogy of building blocks themselves. They’re very relatable, and as kids, many of us will have played with building blocks, like LEGO or the digital equivalent, *Minecraft*. Personally, as a kid, I needed all those building blocks to build something impressive, and I’d search for that always inevitable missing piece.

The same is true here, but our research has found that missing piece for governments. The building blocks in this paper all help, all of them together, to build the best digital strategy. You can do something with, say, just a cloud-first policy or a data classification framework, but if you also have a digital culture, and have armed people with the necessary digital skills, you are much better placed to succeed.

It was also very important to us that the paper was relevant to countries at all different stages of digital transformation and was easily digestible. by grouping the issues into eight key building blocks, we have given people an easier way into that dense policy jungle.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** I think that makes a lot of sense, and the structure of that eight really gives you a view at a glance of what these elements are. And people can look at those and see, you know, where do I think that I already have some strengths, or where do I need to focus and develop more? And as you were building out that flow and understanding more about those different building blocks, were there any links that you found between them?

**ASHLEIGH SINCLAIR:** Yeah, so that was a real eye opener for us. It was clear when we got into the research that the building blocks we found can’t be viewed in isolation. To be successful, they really needed the support of others.

For example, we’ve got building block one, which is implementation of a cloud-first policy. That goes hand in hand with implementing a data classification framework, which is building blocks two. And that in turn goes hand in hand with upskilling government stakeholders and civil servants.

If we drawer a bit deeper into those, one of the key concerns with cloud is the security around information. Having a data classification framework makes it easy to assess what data should be stored, where. People are also key here, as you can’t succeed with building block one without having the necessary understanding about cloud and organizational acceptance of it. So, it’s not only about policy, it’s also about people.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** That really resonates with me and what we hear when we have conversations with governments around the world. And often, you know, we do find countries where there are great examples of cloud-first policies. But actually, cloud adoption hasn’t really advanced because they maybe haven’t addressed having a great data classification policy or really understanding how to turn a policy into action.

So, I think this message that you have about how intertwined all of these are and how thinking of them as foundations, if you take one away, that house is going to crumble. You’ve got to have all of them in place in order to have a really solid base.

And that first building block, and we don’t have time in this podcast to go through all eight of them, but I’d love to just understand a little bit more detail about a couple of them. So, the first building block, which is having a national cloud strategy and a cloud-first policy, could you tell us a little bit more about some of your findings there? Were there any examples of best practice that came out as you were investigating this area?

**ASHLEIGH SINCLAIR:** Yeah, sure, Olivia. Our research found that adoption of a national cloud-first policy was really the first step to a government going digital. One of the key barriers to digital transformation is the lack of an appropriate vision. A cloud-first policy helps to set the scene for a government’s digital transformation, and acts as a sort of cornerstone.

Cloud-first policies themselves require public agencies to prioritize cloud services when procuring digital technologies. Such a mandatory policy gives its government agencies permission to use the cloud without fear, driving significant cultural change because often, there is a bit of hesitancy in moving to the cloud. However, it’s not just about having a cloud policy that looks good on paper.

And that is one of the key findings of our work, that having a cloud policy is not enough. Governments need the time and the resources necessary to successfully implement that policy, including monitoring and evaluating its effectiveness, and ensuring it remains fit for purpose over time.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So, I think a couple of really important points there. What really resonated with me, when you’re talking about giving people permission. By having a national policy, a very public piece, it gives people in departments a sort of top cover to go ahead and say, yes, this is something that we’re moving forward with.

And Andrew, I think what Ashleigh was saying there about making sure that this isn’t just a policy, but it is implemented as well, that it is monitored, that progress is tracked against it, is that something which you’ve seen? And are there any examples that came up through the paper of where countries were doing this well?

**ANDREW COOKE:** Yeah, I mean, I think that’s a really interesting way of sort of looking at it. I mean, I think the first point that needs to be made is an absence of a cloud-first policy, or a cloud strategy doesn’t prohibit a country from adopting or embrace embracing cloud. However, what we’ve really found, and noted and explained in the paper is that those countries that not only have a cloud-first policy, but maybe almost more importantly, have this national cloud strategy, are really embracing technology, and all of the good things that come with cloud at scale and pace.

I think an interesting way of thinking about it and looking at it is that it really is this tone from the top approach, which helps enormously in the execution and the activation of digital transformation.

As we’ve highlighted in the paper, you know, I think probably one doesn’t need to look too much further than Australia and the United Kingdom, as two great examples of countries that have not only published really sound policies, really sound strategies, but have implemented them effectively. And it’s that point that Ashleigh was making about the implementation. So, it’s not just about writing a policy, it’s about implementing the policy.

As far as sort of the little deeper into a couple of countries, look, despite my probable – probably obvious biases, I think Australia is a country that I refer to again and again, when I meet with governments to discuss what success looks like. What I like about the approach in Australia is it’s very much an integrated approach from a policy standpoint, which is yielding really, really good outcomes.

I think sort of further digging into sort of the Asia Pacific region, Singapore is also worth noting. And we spend quite a bit of time in the paper analyzing what Singapore has done and how they’ve done it. Great strategic thought and insight has occurred in Singapore. They’ve set some really bold targets, and then they’ve acted on those. And achieving those targets, I think, is very much worth emulating.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** You mentioned a national cloud strategy and a cloud-first policy. And I wonder if you could just expand a little bit on what’s the difference between those two things. What is the national cloud strategy?

**ANDREW COOKE:** We honestly, we had quite a bit of debate, you know, within sort of the policy team and with Linklaters as to, you know, these building blocks. And, you know, we were thinking, gosh, is it just about a cloud-first policy. But the more research that we did, we saw that a lot of the time where countries have done this successfully, that was prefaced with a cloud strategy.

Think of it like a mission statement that a company or a team may have. I think it sets the tone; it sets the agenda. It is that tone from the top, that overarching approach. I think a lot of the time, you know, human nature is such that unless there is clear strategy, clear direction, clear inspiration, sometimes we just don’t know what to do. We might not know how to activate the cloud-first policy, but the cloud strategy or the all-up tech, technology strategy really sets the direction of a country. It is much more overarching and broader than just about cloud often. And so, we thought we needed to preface the cloud-first conversation with that conversation, with those insights into a strategy, all up.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And I think that’s interesting, because it really raises it up a level as well, whereas we think of something like a cloud-first policy as being something that a CIO in a department or agency might have to adhere to and adopt, but a national strategy may be something which is broader than cloud, which may be encompasses more around technology, that – that raises the conversation up and really makes it something that a much wider group of people care about.

**ANDREW COOKE:** Absolutely, and it may very well come from sort of prime ministerial level view, because it is about a country’s all-up digital transformation journey. And that inspires departments, organizations, agencies, to move forward with confidence.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So I’d like to pick another building block to get into. And for me, one which really stood out was, in fact, the last one, building block number eight, which is digital culture and having a technology skilling agenda. And for me, this – this question, this issue of culture is so fundamental in so many different conversations that we have.

And I’m interested, Ashleigh, is there any practical guidance from the paper that you can share for countries who are thinking about how do we tackle this really fundamental challenge?

**ASHLEIGH SINCLAIR:** Yeah, building block eight is an interesting one, and perhaps a dark horse that it – as it is often overlooked. So, that is the promotion of a digital culture and civil servant upskilling. As we got further into the research, the importance of this building block did become more and more apparent, and it is fundamental to the success of a number of other building blocks.

So, if we look at some practical tips for this, so one of the key points is upskilling and maintaining digital competence. Governments need to understand the current digital skillset and the projected future digital requirements of particular government roles.

A second key area is shifting workplace culture to a digital way of thinking. Our research has shown the importance of keeping employees informed and engaged from day one, and throughout the entire digital transformation journey. To shift any prejudice to digital, people need to understand not only the benefits of the cloud, and other technologies in their daily work lives, but also, they need to know that they will be supported in the shift to digital.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** I find this fascinating because it’s really about how do you support a whole mindset shift, and really working with many workforces, which have been very successful in operating in traditional methods for hundreds of years. And that culture can be very ingrained.

And Andrew, I’m wondering whether there are any examples that stood out to you of who’s managing to do this well, because this is a really complex, difficult challenge. Is there any inspiration out there?

**ANDREW COOKE:** Yeah, there is quite a bit of inspiration, and it really is an interesting one. I think the other point to sort of underscore in relation to this one is, you know, I think when you ask people what is at the heart of digital transformation, the obvious answer is technology. But if you ask what is at the heart of successful digital transformation, it’s undoubtedly people. And so, this building block is central to the success, as we’ve mentioned, of all the other building blocks.

I think Singapore is a great example with their gov tech function. It’s truly a model where they embed culture, a commitment to skilling, I think the other key component of this is – is executive stakeholder buy in, because if you really solicit feedback, viewpoints, needs, and then design something with all that in mind, you are embracing the culture that is needed, and you’re facilitating the needs of the departments generally.

But in, yeah, in real terms, it ties back to the first building block about this national cloud strategy, having that aspiration, and then infusing that aspiration in the culture, coupled with skilling, how to use the technology, how to embrace the technology. That’s where success, that’s where the magic really happens.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Well, there’s so much great content in this paper. I think as people go away, and read it and start to digest it, we have these eight building blocks, which they can use to gather their thoughts and understand which ones might be of greater relevance to them. But where would you recommend people start? Where should governments go next with this, because this is a lot of information? There’s a lot of different pieces of this puzzle to build on and to fix. How should they move forward with that?

**ASHLEIGH SINCLAIR:** I think my main takeaway from this, and one thing I would encourage governments to do, is to be agile. Don’t become wedded to an inflexible and fixed digital transformation policy that becomes irrelevant over time, or quickly becomes no longer fit for purpose.

I think it’s important that governments do take these building blocks and doesn’t see them as an exhaustive list. But they also need to apply them within their own social, economic, political, regulatory landscape, because everyone’s digital roadmap will be different. And it is not one size fits all.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** That’s such a great nuance, because when I went – so, an example I would have of this is when I worked in the UK government in the government digital service there. And there was a digital strategy that did come up, but really the mantra was, the strategy is delivery. And in that context, that really worked. So, being able to see that through the nuance, and the lens of different countries and not getting too prescriptive, I think is a really great caveat to have. Thank you. Andrew, maybe I could turn to you for your thoughts on this.

**ANDREW COOKE:** What I really love about the paper is, of course we dig into, you know, the policies and we provide, a digestible analysis of what the policies are. But I think almost more importantly, it’s the examples that we use, the countries that we refer to that really is the success factor in this paper.

It’s not an exhaustive list of policies. You know, of course, governments need to be thinking about cybersecurity. Of course, they need to be thinking about privacy. But we intentionally just tried to take it back to the foundation, because that’s going to have global relevance. And then what we really hope to do is then engage in more detailed conversations on a country-by-country basis that can take into consideration the unique situations that countries will have.

A couple of other sort of takeaways from the paper, is that it’s really important to acknowledge that pretty much no country is doing this perfectly. Getting policy, right, as we say in the paper, is a journey, it’s not a destination. But as long as you’re heading in the right direction, that’s the key here.

Also picking up on something that Ashleigh just mentioned, and that is this concept of flexibility with policy. Our observation, and I think we learned this from looking into privacy policies, they’re invariably very, very successful. The reason for that is that mostly, they take a principles-based approach to the policy. And what that means is they’re not overly prescriptive, because as soon as you get super prescriptive, as the technology moves, as it does, as we know, at an incredible pace, anything that is too prescriptive becomes dated, and then that has the ability to stifle innovation.

So, policy and regulation, which is flexible, really enables a country to set themselves up to be digital ready, and it kind of future proofs their regulatory policy landscape.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Thank you both. I think this has been a really important part of the conversation, to be talking about these policy foundations for digital transformation. And through this series, we explore a lot of different elements of digital transformation. And we look at people elements and technology elements. But this policy side, this is the third piece of how do you make change happen? So, the opportunity to go into this in more detail with both of you has been fantastic.

So, people will be able to find the link to the paper on our website, of course. And we highly encourage people to go and read the full thing there, if they haven’t already.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Ashleigh, thank you. It’s been a pleasure to have you here.

**ASHLEIGH SINCLAIR:** Thank you very much, Olivia.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And Andrew, thank you as well for joining us. It’s been really great to have your insights, too.

**ANDREW COOKE:** My absolute pleasure.

(Music.)

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Thank you to Ashleigh and to Andrew for all of their insights. You can find the paper, which is full of references and examples on our website, at wwps.microsoft.com. You can also find more insights from Andrew on how lawyers can best support digital transformation. Please do reach out and send us your questions and your feedback. As always, you can find me on Twitter. I’m @LivNeal. I’m also on LinkedIn, or you can e-mail us at Ask-ps@Microsoft.com.

Thank you and see you next time.

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