Public Sector Future WWPS Podcast Series

Episode 52

Olivia Neal (host), Geoff Connell, Norfolk County Council (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 delivering change. 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 Geoff Connell, the Chief Digital Officer for Norfolk County Council in the UK. We're going to be discussing the practical steps Geoff and his team have taken to build digital skills across the organization, the opportunities that technology is providing to improve delivery of services, and how to get people engaged in digital transformation.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Geoff, welcome to the show. Well, maybe we could start off with just learning a bit more about Norfolk County Council. Could you explain what a county council is? What type of services do you offer, and what type of operations do you support?

**GEOFF CONNELL:** Yeah, absolutely. So, Norfolk County Council is in the East of England in the UK. And as a county, the – the main functions that we’re responsible are for adults and children’s social care for quite a wide geography about a million people. We do education, we do highways, we do fire and rescue, and then some smaller, but still important services like births, deaths, marriages, museums, and of course, all the corporate functions that every big organization provides. So, for our 7,000, staff, we do finance, payroll, procurement, HR, IT, all those sorts of things.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So, you’ve got staff working in quite a wide range of areas, everything from frontline delivery, and interacting with – with citizens in Norfolk through to their backend staff and those – supporting those operations as well.

**GEOFF CONNELL:** Yeah, that’s right, and I think that’s what makes it really interesting and challenging at times, because it is so diverse. We offer literally hundreds of different services and – and have hundreds of different systems to do that.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** For you, in your role, how has developing digital skills really become a focus for you? How is that – that skilling element come into play?

**GEOFF CONNELL:** Well, I think the – the need for digital skills has been increasingly understood as the requirement has grown for people to use technology in every aspect of their roles. I think, you know, many years ago, when I first started, it was – it was pretty optional. You know, the – the IT was really kind of mainframe systems. But now, people are using devices in everything they do, whether it’s their mobiles for field work, line of business systems, corporate systems, and increasingly, automation. And I think, particularly the low-code and no-code developments have really changed things in terms of how we tried to get everybody skilled up to – to work.

And it really started for us with our change of social care system, maybe around five years ago, that we ramped it up to another level. I think we recognized that our staff needed some catch up. We probably hadn’t done enough to keep them skilled. So, we said to – to get the most out of this really significant investment in this new social care system, which involve – involved mobile working technologies as well, we’d go back to scratch, and we’d develop the skills that they need.

And of course, that’s just for – for staff. The whole digital skills for our residents and our population is another dimension that’s – that’s really important to us.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So, as you’re making investments and improving the operations, that skilling is coming alongside of it. And it sounds like, in this case with the social care system, that’s focusing on building up the skills of those people who are out there on the frontline, delivering social care services.

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**GEOFF CONNELL:** Yeah, that’s absolutely right. And one of the challenges in areas like social care is it’s really hard to recruit enough skilled staff. So, our approach is to – to think how do we enable the stuff that we already have to be as productive as they possibly can. And use of technology to – to reduce the time that they spend doing the administration is an important component.

And in – in recent times, in particular, I think the advancement around low-code and no-code technologies, and automation generally, has meant that we can really focus on driving out those and automating those lower value activities, so that the staff can focus on what’s really important, you know, relationships and human services that – that they provide. So, it’s, you know, it is really trying to use the technology to amplify the effect of those staff that we have.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And when their time is such a scarce resource, that becomes so important. And so, what approach have you been taking in Norfolk County Council to help staff develop those new skills?

**GEOFF CONNELL:** As I mentioned, we’ve really gone back to scratch. We’ve recognized that we’ve probably underinvested over an extended period of time in digital skills, and we’ve made assumptions that people come into the organization have a certain level of skill. So, what we did was one-to-one sessions with everybody, as we rolled out the new equipment, rolled out the new systems and technology, to make sure that they can do – they can use these things properly. We’ve taken nothing for granted.

And I’ll be honest, the – the kind of low base of skills with some people probably did take us by surprise, but also means the opportunity to improve their productivity is really significant. So, that – that was a lot of one-to-one training there.

I think when COVID came along, we recognized that we had to do things a bit differently. And so, we did massive broadcasts of training for how to use things like Teams. And – and we literally trained thousands of staff in a matter of days and weeks.

So, I think using the new technologies, particularly use of Teams, has allowed us to – to get to more staff a lot quicker. And I think with the advent of YouTube, and that sort of thing, people increasingly looking to video content to – to get their digital skills or any kind of skills. So, increasingly, what we’re doing is creating bite-sized chunks of digital training through video that people can consume as and when they want to, and they can top up and, and refresh themselves. So, that’s been a healthy approach.

And we’ve also tried to focus on building communities, communities of people who want to work together and support each other around. For example, the change agent network that we’re involved in has been a great community that – that kind of self supports and learns together.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Could you tell me a bit more about that change agent network? What type of program is that?

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**GEOFF CONNELL:** Yeah, certainly. The – the change agent network has actually been facilitated and – and developed in conjunction with Microsoft. And – and what we do is we bring together people who are involved in digitally enabled change from multiple local authority organizations to – to work together, to learn together. And it’s really recognizing that for this cohort, they don’t need to be developers, they don’t need deep technical skills.

What they need to do is understand how does tech, and digital and data fit into – into a change program? How does it enable changes to ways of working to improve productivity, improve the user experience. And so, the focus is very much on tech and digital in the context of business change.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So, it sounds like there’s a few different streams of activity that you’ve been advancing. So, you’ve got upskilling of staff on particularly new digital tools that they’re going to be using in their day-to-day role. You’ve got the broad, widescale skilling of tools like Teams, which – which almost everybody is using, and then you’ve got those people who are going to be change agents and champions who can help advance the organization as a whole.

And you mentioned low-code and no-code applications a couple of times. Could you tell me a little bit more about the skilling that you’ve done there and what you’ve seen as the outcomes of that?

**GEOFF CONNELL:** Yeah, you’re absolutely right. We – we look at the digital skills as something that we target different groups in different ways. So, they’re the basics, the Teams, and, you know, Microsoft products and various things like that, use of our ERP system for, you know, to do your expenses and annual leave, and all that kind of thing. So, we’ve recognize there’s a need for a baseline of digital skills for all. And that’s been supported by our HR learning and development people, who perhaps I can map that later.

So, it’s a base level of digital skills for absolutely everybody. And then it’s really role specific. So, that might be about using your line of business system in -in highways or social care or education, or it might be about the change agent network, where it’s using digital as a – as a change capability to support new ways of working and innovation, or it might be people who do want to get deeper into redesigning and automating the way that they work.

So, that’s where the low-code, no-code, and even robotic process automation comes in, different levels of scale skills for each. So, Power automate, for example, we’re getting, you know, hundreds of staff all around the organization, developing with these tools, optimizing the ways that they work locally, and automating, supported by a center of excellence in the IT and digital function.

So, it really is about looking at everybody’s role and thinking how do we digitally upskill them to get the best out of our technology investment, and to increasingly automate everything we can, and to improve that – that customer and user experience.

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**OLIVIA NEAL:** Alongside that technology investment that’s been made, this is another investment in terms of use of people’s time to – to gain the advantages in the future. But did you have to make the case for that internally, using people’s time in this way to get them trained up? Was it something that you had to build support for or were people already supportive of – of this need?

**GEOFF CONNELL:** I would say people were supportive of the need in principle, but it was still a requirement to build the case for it to do it, actually, to put money against it, to put people’s time against it. And it’s also worth reflecting, this isn’t just Norfolk County Council. If I look at digital inclusion and upskilling of staff, it’s something we’ve done in conjunction with the – the NHS, National Health System in – in our region.

So, it’s called an integrated care system, so we all work together to try to develop the use digital skills for staff, but also recognizing that if we can digitally upskill our residents, they can look after their own health better. They can use our online systems, they can improve their wealth – health, wealth and well-being. So, it’s in that broader context of working across the system.

But in terms of the capacity that’s needed for doing this training, yeah, it really did start off with individual changes. So, looking at we’re bringing each new system or each new capability, how do we train people, and then recognizing, over time, we’re doing this repeatedly, there’s a general need.

And then I thought about our service desk, how a lot of the calls that we get are really how-to questions, things where if people had better digital skills, they wouldn’t need to ask the question. They wouldn’t need to take up the technical teams’ time, and they wouldn’t need to – to spend their time on it, either. So, we’ve aligned that digital training and skills offer with the service desk to spot the things that people regularly ask and be proactive in terms of upskilling them. And that effectively creates its own business case, as you reduce the demand against the service desk.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And I really like that emphasis on – on thinking of this as an initiative, which is not just an internal one, but really integrates with those other parts of the community that you work with and that you serve. And I’m interested to know how staff have responded to this. Have you – have people been enthusiastic? Have you faced pushback? Have people appreciated these new skills that they’ve been developing, or is it something that you’ve had to bring them on a journey towards?

**GEOFF CONNELL:** I think it’s a mix, and I think it is a journey as well. So, as with any change initiative, I think some people are hesitant, cautious, scared, even, scared of maybe being shown up for not having the skills that people will assume they have. Others absolutely grasp the opportunity to – to upskill to embrace new technologies.

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And so, what we tried to do is make some of it mandatory. So, there’s a mandatory basic skill level that’s expected, that’s been supported by our human resources, our people management service. And then there are areas where you need more skills to operate those – those systems. And then there are parts that are optional. You can buy into it, if you wish, but you don’t have to.

But it’s also been a journey, and I think helping our residents to digitally upskill has actually enthused some of our staff. So, example, during COVID, when we had the lockdown and children were sent home from school at short notice, we recognized that thousands of children would be digitally disadvantaged. They wouldn’t be able to get proper education because they didn’t have… mainly, it was equipment.

So, we – we came together as an organization. We worked with local voluntary organizations and – and our partners. And in a matter of weeks, we rolled out 5,000 laptops to every digitally disadvantaged child in the county. And I think there was a great sense of pride that came from mobilizing that kind of capability, and a great recognition from staff that actually, this is just as relevant for – for our residents as it is for staff. It’s about digital skills in your private life, as well as at work, and things like cybersecurity skills. There’s relevant for keeping your family’s data and finances safe as they are in the office. So, we tried to kind of cross fertilize those ideas of digital skills for general life and for work.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Absolutely. I really – I really like that, that sense of building this as something that is important, not just in your employment, but in – in your wider life as well. And – and so, you’ve been on this journey, and I think it’s probably one that is still going, has there been anything that has surprised you, as you’ve been skilling people and helping them move up in their own capabilities?

**GEOFF CONNELL:** What surprised me, I think that there was a lower base of skills in certain parts of the organization than I would have assumed. I think sometimes, when you’re in technology, just kind of assume people have a certain level of knowledge. And it was definitely lower. So, the scale of the investment in terms of time and – and capacity was greater than I thought.

I probably also learned that it wasn’t enough to train people. When you’re introducing new technology, you’ve got to remember that every new starter needs that training repeated for them, or you’re building up a digital skills gap. So, that was an important element that I guess I learned along the way, and also top ups.

I think once you’ve created good video content, in particular, people can dip in and out. They can get bite-sized chunks of training on demand when they need them, when they realize they’re trying to do something that they’ve forgotten. So, I think those are the few bits of the learning.

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And the other one probably is actually, some people just really surprise you. You know, there’s some people who don’t have a development or, you know, a techie background, who very quickly got themselves to pretty much expert level in – in development, simply because they had the right attitude and aptitude, and they – self – self learned. So, yeah, I guess it – it was a bit of everything really, in that respect.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And if somebody from either a different county or a different country, even, was looking to replicate what you’ve done, and really build the skills of the people in their organization, is there any advice that you’d have for them on where to get started?

**GEOFF CONNELL:** I would say, if possible, have this as a joint ownership activity, not just an IT thing. I think if you can get your – your – your people services, your human resources, learning and development staff to kind of co-own this with you, that helps. Certainly, I deployed some – some capacity in there to – to work across both. That was one thing that was useful to do.

I think another one is to – is to build communities. So, we have communities such as the change agent network that I mentioned a few times, and I love that. I have to say, everybody who’s been on that training comes back utterly enthused by the art of the possible and the new people they’ve met. And I think that community self-propagates. It builds itself; it keeps itself going. And so, we have other communities around the – the kind of development side of things, assistive tech. There are a whole bunch of groups of people who work together.

So, I think if you can foster those communities of digital champions or groups of like-minded people, that really helps, and also to – to rebuild that business case around not just doing point-in-time investments in training for new developments, but having a permanent team that can constantly be topping up people’s skills, supporting new initiatives, and driving down the volume of calls that you see associated with the – with the service desk, because that, as I say, that creates its own business case.

I think those are probably a few of the main things I would – I would look to share with others.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** You mentioned there the communities and the enthusiasm that they drive, and how, you know, they can bring new ideas back into an organization. Are there any areas where you’re particularly excited or optimistic about technology supporting the operations that you have in Norfolk County Council in the future? You mentioned earlier some of the advantages of reducing admin and allowing staff to spend more time, really supporting residents. Are there opportunities that you’re looking at, at the moment?

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**GEOFF CONNELL:** Yeah, absolutely. I mean, one of the great things in – in digital and technology and – and data is the opportunities are constantly developing. New things come along all the time. And – and unlike many – many other areas that we have to invest in, the cost of the technology often trends downward, so things become more accessible.

So, what am I – what am I excited about? I’m excited about mainstreaming the use of automation. we’ve got lots, probably 60 different use cases now that we’ve developed for automation. And I think that’s such a sweet spot for us, because the amount of demand we have from our communities, from our residents, is always increasing, particularly with an aging population. The amount of money that we have to service those people constantly trends downwards. So, automation and effective use of data are two of the best ways I think that we can cope with – with that challenge of demand and resource.

So, using predictive analytics to get ahead of the curve to spot, for example, people who are likely to fall in next year, do you proactively support them to stop that happening? So, you reduce the demand from the outset, but you reduce the cost of serve. That – that’s, I think, a great example of use of – of those technologies.

Another set of technologies that are linked to that are what we call assistive tech, so technology that people use in their own homes to help them live independently for longer. Again, it’s a huge win/win. People get to live independently, higher quality of life for longer, but the cost of the system is actually reduced.

AI, hot topic at the moment. You know, there’s – there’s fear and worry, and there are ethical dynamics associated with its adoption. But there’s also a huge amount of excitement about what mundane activities could this automate, how could it speed up application processes or, you know, provision of services? So, I think that’s really exciting.

So, automation, emerging technology, the low-code, no-code, the AI, all exciting opportunities for driving greater value and better outcomes for our residents in the future.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And I think so many of these opportunities that you talk about there, or maybe even all of them, are – are opportunities to address challenges, which are really shared across many different organizations, and – and people in other councils will be facing similar challenges. And you’ve talked about communities that some of the – the staff at the Council are part of. How about you, as Chief Digital Officer? How do you keep yourself up to date? Do you have communities which you’re part of which give you inspiration?

**GEOFF CONNELL:** Yeah, very – very much so. So, networking is a big part of how I learn. I learn from my peers, both in local public sector, national public sector, and also private sector. I always think innovation, or a big part of innovation is taking ideas from different contexts and different places and reusing them in your own contexts.

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So, I’m a big fan of learning from others. Clearly, I read a lot because everybody has to, I think, to – to gather information, but a big part of it is learning from others. So, I’ve… I’m a past president of the Society of IT Managers in the UK. I did that for a couple of years. And so, SOCITM, it’s called, is a really important community to me.

I think Microsoft has been doing a phenomenal job over the last year, in particular, building communities that can learn together, that can share assets, whether that’s code, documents, ideas, or whatever. So, hats off to Microsoft for really stepping up its game over the last year to – to help us to network and learn. And I have a number which I mentioned, which are across sector, working with the private sector in particular. And health and care, working with my – my health colleagues to try to take a whole system approach to change is an important one for me as well.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Well, those are fantastic examples. Thank you so much for doing this with us.

**GEOFF CONNELL:** Brilliant. Lovely to talk to you.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Thank you to our guest, Geoff Connell, and thank you to you for joining me today on Public Sector Future. If you'd like to learn more about digital skilling visit us at wwps.microsoft.com. Our goal is for you to learn something new and to be inspired to think differently about your journey. Thank you and see you next time

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