Public Sector Future WWPS Podcast Series

Episode 55

Olivia Neal (host), Dr. Sheila LeBlanc (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.

We're continuing our focus on digital skills, and today I’m joined by Dr. Sheila LeBlanc. Dr LeBlanc is Associate Vice President of Continuing Education at the University of Calgary in Canada. We're going to be discussing how she and her team have been bringing digital and technology skills into the heart of lifelong learning, how they have used data to gain insights to build the success those taking courses, and how this supports the needs both of students, and of local businesses.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Dr. LeBlanc, thank you so much for joining us.

**DR. LEBLANC:** Oh, my pleasure, it’s a wonderful opportunity to speak with you.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Well, I wonder if you could start by sharing a little bit about the University of Calgary. Where are you situated, and what are you focused on?

**DR. LEBLANC:** Absolutely. The University of Calgary is not surprisingly located in Calgary, the City of Calgary in Alberta, Canada. So we’re in the western part of Canada, about an hour east of Banff in the Rocky Mountains, which is a landmark for many. We have a population of about 1.4 million and we have a campus undergraduate and graduate student body of about just under 30,000, at this point in time. We also have about 30,000 continuing educational enrollments, which is the team that I have the privilege to lead, and 1,800 academic staff, and about 3,200 non-academic staff. So we’re a research-intensive university in Western Canada.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So continuing education is clearly a real priority for the University of Calgary, and you are the Associate Vice President for Continuing Education. Could you tell us a little bit about what your priorities are in that role?

**DR. LEBLANC:** I get excited when I think about continuing education, because we have the –what I consider to be the most interesting role in the academy. We crossover the depth and breadth of a student body on their lifelong learning journey, from – and preparatory programs, such as academic upgrading and English language programming, all the way through to personal interest stuff, or – our senior communities, and everything in between.

Our – some of our key focuses at this point in time are really looking at the mid-career upskilling, reskilling for professional practice in all disciplines. So we work with all of the faculties as well as a number of external partners like Microsoft and others in order to ensure that we’re upskilling and reskilling people for the world of work in the future.

And right now, that’s digital transformation. And that’s one of the most important things that we’re doing at this point in time, is really looking at how do we evolve and build the skillsets of people throughout a lifetime, to keep them ready for the new world of work?

**OLIVIA NEAL:** I think this is such an interesting area of focus. Because traditionally, we’ve always thought of education as being something that’s very front-loaded in career, but now with the pace of technology change that we’re seeing, we’re all having to learn and develop those skills all the time, whether we’re in digital and technology roles or other types of roles as well.

And you mentioned that you’re really focused on people in mid-career and building those digital transformation types of skills. How has that area of digital and technology become a focus for you?

**DR. LEBLANC:** Well, I guess, meeting people where they’re at and where industry is at, is what I would say how it’s become a focus. The response of the educational unit as part of the institution and that really looks at what’s needed in the world to work.

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We’re paying attention to what’s happening in the economy and what’s happening in the world work, but also in terms of demand for the enrollments and demand for what students are looking for, and also some employer consultations.

So we, as part of being a responsive unit, we want to make sure that we’re engaging the employers to see what skills and knowledge they need. So we’re seeing, not surprisingly, tons of disruption in all types of different jobs and roles, and that’s really enhanced the amount of offerings that we provide.

And our work, in my mind, is really driven by how do we think about, not just the individual skills, but then how the different roles are changing. PricewaterhouseCoopers did a really, really interesting piece, looking at transformation and not complete transformation, but more how a job – you’re in a job for a number of years, and it changes over time and percentage. And as that percentage changes, there are some new skills needed, and those new skills are what we’re trying to enhance.

I can give a really quick, short example, personal. My first undergraduate degree was in marketing. That was quite some time ago. Well, social media didn’t exist. Heck, the internet wasn’t well used. The type of skills that you need to be a good marketer, at this point in time, are totally different.

So if there wasn’t upskilling and reskilling about how to use technology, and also how to use – what are the new skills available, I wouldn’t be useful in my job if I was a marketer. So it’s really thinking over that lifespan, what are those new knowledge pieces that we add on to the front-loaded piece that folks go into their work with, that shortening knowledge of how long that learned knowledge is useful, and having to do it more and more frequently, that in and out of school, work, school work – I call it school, but it’s actually learning in any context is becoming more relevant every day.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** You mentioned there really balancing the demands that you’re seeing from students and people enrolling in courses, and the needs of the local economy, what businesses need. How do you make sure that what you’re doing in Calgary with students is really benefiting the local economy and the diversification of skills that they need?

**DR. LEBLANC:** So the impact locally is really about staying connected to our Calgary Economic Development and the community of employers that are here, and we have advisory groups associated with the various programming areas, where we have representatives from different employers. If we look at the organizational development and talent development folks that are in those organizations, they help inform us.

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So that whole idea of, as we see all this information becoming available, there’s opportunity for short-cycle learning, and you know, the buzz of the day is micro-credentials, you know, the short-duration learning that adds on and stacks over time to people as they transition through their career.

We get information from everywhere. It’s just the volume and the curation of that information and translating that into what we do with it, it’s kind of where the magic comes, and that’s why I’m so proud of the incredible team of innovators that I have working in ContEd.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Well, it sounds like you’re really plugged into a much wider ecosystem, and understanding data and inputs from all different places, and finding partnerships, which can help drive success in those areas. And I know that one of the partnerships that you do have is with Microsoft, where the University of Calgary is a Microsoft Global Training Partner, and a Microsoft Learning Partner.

And I wonder if you could just tell us a bit about what those partnerships mean in practice for you at the University of Calgary.

**DR. LEBLANC:** Absolutely. So being a partner with Microsoft has been a great experience for us, and really like – I think it’s adding value to the learners and the communities that we serve, both local and beyond. So if we start thinking about types of certifications that we can offer, the types of partnerships we can work with, so we have opportunities for organizations that are using Microsoft products too – that were able to accredit their learners that go through a Microsoft Learning Program, as well as get referrals, globally, to support organizations and individuals in learning a variety of Microsoft programs.

So, on the ground, what that really looks for us – looks like for us, and we’ve been a partner for just over two years. We’ve pulled over 13,000 people, just in Microsoft Azure. We’ve had – helped faculty in research start to – researchers start to develop some of the – and learn some of the latest technology that’s available. We’re working through a variety of other post-secondary institutions, and actually teaching them, so as one of the leaders within our sector.

We’ve got 2,400 University of Calgary students that have actually received Microsoft Certification Exams, and finished the qualification certification through our programming. We offer a ton of different micro-credentials that we’ve brought through a number of the Microsoft skills that were so needed by our local employers.

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It’s just been a really strong partnership for us, where I think we’re contributing both to the education sector, but also to our employers here, and beyond. And the reason I’ll say beyond with, you know, some significance is that we’ve been collecting data, and using a wonderful Power BI tool that’s in Microsoft, to allow us to understand where our learners are from, what kind of a – and learn a lot about how they learn, by really identifying that we have learners from all over the world, and what’s happened is we’re using some of the technology to have virtual labs.

And although we engage students in synchronous learning, it’s online learning in our Microsoft work. So it’s instructor led and it’s instructor engaged, but it’s not – it can be done from anywhere. And so that broader impact is something that I’m also excited about for us to be seeing in the leader in Microsoft Learning, around the world.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And the ability to have an impact for people from outside Calgary as well, through these new types of learning, gives you that – that breadth and that ability to stretch into broader space. But I wonder, does it also have an impact on the way that you’re able to make learning and continuing education available to people from different types of backgrounds?

As I think about your role in continuing education, you mentioned you’re dealing with people from all different age groups, from all different parts of communities, and I imagine rural environments, as well as urban environments. And I wonder if there’s any elements of the technology that comes into play in making sure that a wide range of people are able to benefit from these types of opportunities.

**DR. LEBLANC:** Now you’re venturing into an area that I’m starting to get excited about because we’re dipping our toe in that, a little bit more of that, recently. And that – in thinking about our K through 12 audiences, and those that are perhaps underrepresented or marginalized in our communities and haven’t come into the university sector, so how do we work with and provide access and learning for some of these technologies that might move them into some other choices, in both their professional and personal lives?

So working with our faculty in education and our education board for the K through 12 system, that’s kindergarten to grade 12, here in Canada, so this is primary to secondary learning, helping them understand and get access to a significant amount of free training, which has been, again, partnerships with employers, plus RBC, which is one of our national banks, here in Canada, that has supported us with some funding.

We’ve had Microsoft encouraging and funding to help us start making that learning available to not only the teachers in those systems, but into some of those communities. So that’s going to be coming soon, and we’ve just sort of kept – put our finger and toes into that area.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** I love that full spectrum of thinking about K through 12, and then you’ve got kind of people coming through their undergraduate degrees, and then that – into their mid-career, and then you mentioned, right in the beginning, dealing in helping and supporting people much later in career as well. I think that’s a really exciting range to be looking at.

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**DR. LEBLANC:** That, as they get a little bit older, we think –we call that group "curious learning." So when we start talking about our various audience groups, so as someone is – you know, past their working career, but actually still wants to learn and live. You know, we live a long time now, and actually technology enables our life. It’s not just about work now.

And maybe even to be able to, you know, do your banking, to be able to do your day-to-day life, to be able to get access to parking in the city, so many things require some basic technology literacy and tools. That’s another element of a community service that I think is important for us to continue to support, to support those curious minds that are out there that still need to live and work in the new world.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Yeah, absolutely, so that nobody gets left behind, as we go through this transformation. I’m interested, as you’ve been increasing focus on digital and technology skills, and increasing the amount of opportunities that are available to people in this space, is there anything in the responses of staff and students that has surprised you? Have they welcomed these new opportunities?

**DR. LEBLANC:** In terms of the actual larger programs that we’ve been doing, we’ve had thousands and thousands of students. We’ve really pushed the envelope in learning about how are – you know, the – the academic language is pedagogy, and what it means is our approach to teaching and how we teach, and the size of the classes that we can have, and how a virtual lab, and how we do that type of learning on scale at a modest cost, to enable access to more learners is really something we’re doing about our design. And we’re thinking about now learning in terms of – I used the words "curious" and "validation."

So how do we curate this massive amount of fabulous content that’s out there, because the world is full of information now? Our job is to say, "What’s the good stuff?" You know, how do we filter it, and then how do we package it up and make it available to learners, kind of to meet them where they’re at, and then how do we validate that learning has happened? And that’s a really, I think, the next step in terms of competency-based education and in terms of trying to provide education in this new world of "information is everywhere," and what is – what does someone need, and how do we help them with that over their learning, really, over a lifetime?

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And there’s a lot of complexity in that, and we’re not perfect, but we’re improving and gaining skills, internal competencies in that, which I think are what educators need in the world, going forward.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** As you’ve been developing these new approaches and introducing new classes and certifications to students, how have you been able to judge if this has been a success?

**DR. LEBLANC:** So really looking at how did we – I guess, rise in the visibility of the Microsoft world of learning, and that’s because more students who take our programming, successfully complete the certification exams, than anywhere else.

And as I mentioned before, as we start looking at pedagogical changes, how do we approach the learning, how do we design that? Every session we’re moving, every session we’re watching the data to inform that, so we’re looking at students’ participation through our learning management system. We’re looking at success in the virtual lab and where the students get stuck.

We’re taking the students’ feedback, and we’re looking at the exam – cumulative information associated with success to see where there might have been gaps in what we did, so actually using data and using learning to inform our learning practice is a linkage that I think, I’m very proud of our team that’s doing that work, because it’s not me, but they’re the ones on the ground making it happen, and the outcomes, the impacts, in terms of more people completing their certifications is – it tells the story for us.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** you’re taking that data that you can see, through the systems, of things that which were – like where students are dropping out, where they may be moving away from some of the engagement, and then you’re addressing those by making tweaks to the instruction, or the way that people are engaged as they’re going forward.

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**DR. LEBLANC:** Exactly. Because if we’re lucky, in these large virtual classrooms, it’s a combination of synchronous and asynchronous instructor led, so synchronous when the instructor is actually there with you, asynchronous when they allow the learners to go through different activities, like a virtual lab, or go through some materials, and where we’re seeing those problems, and where we can see the persistence rate of how many students continue out of that 200-person cohort for that one class, where do we see that, and how do we adjust? How do we add more?

And we actually added more synchronous time. We identified, as one example, having more of that was actually important in terms of persistence, and so you make a change, you see the outcome. This is good. Oh, we made a change, and it didn’t end up so good. We of course correct, again, so that continuous iteration of our practice of how we teach something being driven by the data is also something that I think is quite new when we talk about technology-enhanced learning platforms, and allow us to do that, and that us, as educators, taking a new approach to our practice to do that in a way that helps the learners at the center.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So you’ve clearly learned a lot– as you’ve gone along this journey, and you’re iterating your approach and continuing to learn as you roll more opportunities out and think about how to curate those and package those in the best possible way. If there were somebody listening to this conversation from a different country, a different region, and they’re looking to build up their own approach to supporting people to develop more digital skills, are there any recommendations you’d share, or any particular lessons you’ve learned, as you’ve gone along the way, that you think would be useful for other people to be aware of?

**DR. LEBLANC:** I think my immediate response is don’t recreate the wheel. And it’s – it’s quite a classic, what I call academic falling, occasionally, is that each individual is, "I think I have to create my own content. I have to create my own class. I have to create my own approach." It’s actually there’s so much out there, and there’s actually approaches that are out there, and there’s sharing to be had, through partnerships, through collaboration, through learning through best practices,– and partnerships are key to that.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And you mentioned earlier the opportunities that new technologies have given you to offer teaching in different ways to allow learners to consume this new information in different ways. Are there any other ways which you think technology or digital skills will be an important part of the future of education, any new opportunities you see appearing over the horizon, which you are thinking about at the moment?

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**DR. LEBLANC:** Oh, my goodness, there’s so many in terms – whether it be through, you know, augmented reality or virtual reality, whether it be simulations, for example, virtual field trips or all kinds of simulations that are possible, as see them inherit some of that learning. AI technology and how that can assist in some intelligent tutoring or personalized support.

There’s so much potential right now. In fact, I mean, we keep saying, we’re – you know, this trend for me, like oh, my gosh, like the ChatGPT and, you know, natural language recognition, all of those things are happening at this time, over this last number of months, is just mind-blowing in terms of possibilities.

So when I say it’s important for us on the learning to be consumers of learning, continuously, is key, so there’s so much there. Even in cybersecurity and the things that folks, every citizen needs to know to protect themselves, and how some of those tools can help.

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**OLIVIA NEAL:** One of the other things that you mentioned, and I think it comes up in that last answer as well, is just the volume of learning that is available at the moment, and it’s available to all of us, and the pace of change that’s going alongside that.

And I’m interested to know, from your personal perspective, you’re obviously in a very privileged position where you’re surrounded by learning, surrounded by knowledge all the time. How do you make sure that you’re keeping up to date?

**DR. LEBLANC:** Oh, my goodness, there is a plethora of information out there as you suggested. I guess, locally, I’m always listening to our employers, because they know what’s needed here and now, and I think goodness, there is a plethora of information out there as if adapted, I guess locally, I’m always grateful to our employers, because they know what’s needed here. And I think to – to go out into the literature is not helpful, always, but to balance that. So here in Canada, I mentioned RBC as an employer. They do a strong bit of work and research around what’s happening across Canada and in the field, in the world of work, here in Canada.

The DeVry Institute is also another strong research area that provides some really tangible, useful materials. Internationally, the World Economic Forum and the Future of Work Forum associated with that, have – and some of the large consulting firms, I mentioned PricewaterhouseCoopers, PWC, and some others that do some good work as well.

It’s really about carving out enough time and getting good at kind of sensing what the flags and seeing some of the signals, and it does take a significant amount of time, and as you mentioned, I am in a privileged position. I recognize that, and I’m thankful for it, but part of my job is to maintain awareness of those signals to guide my team and to guide perhaps some of our future investments in technology and partnerships and things, that – it is my brain candy, if I’m going to tell the truth, because as a nerd, I love it.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Well, this has been fantastic. Thank you so much, again, for sharing all of those insights and spending the time with us.

**DR. LEBLANC:** My pleasure, my privilege, lovely to share. Thank you for taking the time to speak with me, and nice to meet you.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Thank you to our guest, Dr. Sheila Le Blanc, and thank you to you for joining me today on Public Sector Future. Visit us at wwps.microsoft.com to find more insights and material to help you your own digital skills and those of your team. Our goal is for you to learn something new and to be inspired to think differently about your journey. As always, please do send us your questions and feedback, you can find me on LinkedIn, or email us at ask-ps@microsoft.com. Thank you and see you next time.

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