**Public Sector Future WWPS Podcast Series**

**Episode 62**

**Olivia Neal [host], Robyn Scott [guest] (Co-founder and CEO of Apolitical)**

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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 and I’m your host, Olivia Neal.

If you've been keeping an eye on our Microsoft Public Sector Center of Expertise recently, you'll have seen lots of new information and material on generative AI, and last week we released a new report, with the organization Apolitical. This report looks at three government organizations who are using generative AI, at scale, right now.

I'm delighted to be joined today by Robyn Scott, the co-founder and CEO of Apolitical to explore the findings of this report, and what we can learn from these examples. When looking for people who understand how governments operate, Robyn is right up there - she and the Apolitical team work with public servants in 160 countries to build new skills, and she's currently serving on the World Economic Forum's AI Governance Alliance, just one of many other roles.

Robyn, thanks so much for joining us. Welcome to the show.

**ROBYN SCOTT:** Thank you. It’s so fun to be here.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Well, I wonder if we could start by just sharing a little bit of information on what you do at Apolitical, what your mission is and who you’re working with.

**ROBYN SCOTT:** Of course. So Apolitical is a network and learning platform exclusively for the public service. We are used today by well over 200,000 public servants and policymakers in 160 different countries.

Our mission is to build 21st century governments that work for people and the planet, so we really focus on those challenges. And of course, mostly top of this list these days is AI.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** You’ve got 200,000 civil servants that you’re supporting. And I think that’s from all regions around the world, right? They’re not just in one area.

**ROBYN SCOTT:** No, 160 different countries represented.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And so in terms of thinking about building that 21st century government, of course, digital transformation and of course technology are going to be a part of that. And you just mentioned that AI is starting to be one of those things that is top of mind. What type of feedback are you hearing in terms of trends, in terms of areas of interest for civil servants around the world?

**ROBYN SCOTT:** Oh, it’s so interesting because it’s unlike any other technological disruption from a government perspective, just in terms of the interest and the speed of uptake.

So first of all, we’re seeing enormous interest in leveraging AI, and also the big question of how to regulate it. A data point that I find super interesting, given what we often hear more broadly in the media, is around optimism. And it turns out, amongst our members, public servants, they actually tend to be much more hopeful and excited about AI than fearful of it.

The split the last time we polled last year was 56% hopeful and 35% a bit cautious or fearful. So that’s one sort of balance of – towards optimism. And this is related, I think, to the second area, which is the steep adoption curve we’re seeing.

So already last year 22% of our members, when we polled them, were using generative AI for research and 19% were using to help with writing. We expect that figure only to get bigger. We can talk more about those two use cases, but research and writing are very important in governments.

And as early as March last year, 39% were already using generative AI in their work. So that’s March 2023. But that had jumped to 54% by July. So that’s very rapid adoption by any standards and especially by government standards.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** That’s really interesting because I think there is a preconception or a stereotype sometimes out there that governments and public sector organizations can be quite risk averse. And I think often there’s really good reasons for – for that. You know, governments are dealing with incredibly sensitive data, and using taxpayers money. But with these types of generative AI tools, there’s something that as individuals, people have been able to get their hands on and test out and see opportunities for. And I wonder if that’s something that’s playing into some of the optimism that’s happening there. People can see things for themselves.

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**ROBYN SCOTT:** Absolutely. And I think what distinguishes the adoption of AI is you’ve got a top-down and a bottom-up dynamic. And right now, in a top-down sense, I’d say it’s more geared towards how do we regulate and control. And then the bottom-up adoption is very much around how can we use this, this really useful technology just to handle our very challenging and sometimes overwhelming jobs better?

**OLIVIA NEAL:** That’s really interesting. And the report that we’re going to be talking about today, this report really focuses on generative AI. And I think this is such an interesting area because of course, AI more broadly, we have been talking about this for a number of years now, and there are some great examples out there, but these generative AI capabilities are new and emerging, and – and when we started talking about this report, what we were really excited about showcasing was some of this actually happening in reality, right now, by civil servants being used and sharing some of those lessons and best practice, and I think that for me was what made this really exciting.

**ROBYN SCOTT:** Absolutely. And those data points I’ve just shared, those are around generative AI specifically. As you say, there’s obviously a long history of use of AI more broadly, but when we look at this adoption curve, it’s generative AI tools.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And in this report, that we’ve been working on together, this report showcases three case studies of civil servants who are using generative AI tools, generative AI capabilities within their organizations.

So this covers, I think, really interestingly, different regions of the world and different levels of government that we’ve got. And Tokyo Metropolitan Government, we’ve got the national level government in Portugal, and we’ve got the city of Kelowna in Canada. And I think maybe if we could just delve into each of those and you could share a little bit about what’s been going on in each of those places, that might just give people a bit of a flavor of what the report is covering.

So I don’t know where you’d like to start. Should we start with Portugal?

**ROBYN SCOTT:** Sure. I was going to suggest Canada, seeing that’s where you’re sitting, but we can certainly – I would like to be in Portugal sun right now, so let’s start there.

What we don’t have represented in these case studies is an emerging market, and I think could be really interesting looking forward to follow that, because in some ways in digital adoption, emerging markets have often been faster than high-income countries with a lot of legacy infrastructure, so just kind of calling that out as a bit of context.

So Portugal has, through its administrative modernization agency, created a virtual assistant to help the public navigate their digital authentication system. And really interesting here was the speed. So through iterating and testing, the avatars answers rose from 40% accuracy to 90% just in the first two weeks.

So they really saw the power of the technology to just improve, super-fast. They have plans, really interesting, plans to develop the avatar to speak between 15 and 20 languages, which will be used to help new citizens who might not speak Portuguese or English fluently. And I think that element of inclusion, which is so important to governments, is exemplified here.

There are, of course, ways that generative AI, used incorrectly with the wrong datasets can exacerbate issues of exclusion, but it’s also a really powerful tool for inclusion, done well, applied well.

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**OLIVIA NEAL:** That’s a really interesting lesson that you pull out there on that iteration and testing side. I think when we’re looking at digital transformation generally, whether AI or not, I think one of the things that we talk a lot about is iteration, learning, testing with users, feeding that back in and not having a big bang approach. And I think that comes across really clearly in the Portuguese example of how they are building these capabilities and adding to them and refining them to make them a success for the users.

**ROBYN SCOTT:** A hundred precent, but actually, when our team doing the research looked at the shared lessons across what are quite superficially diverse case studies, geographically diverse, diverse in terms of level and government, actually, that was one of the cross-cutting themes. And one of the surprising things about the shared lessons were how many of them there were across these three, just three different case studies.

So perhaps we can get on to that, but shall we go to Tokyo or Canada?

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Yes. Let’s go to Tokyo next. And so now we’re looking at Tokyo, which is a city government rather than a national level government, but of a huge scale. I mean, Tokyo is a scale that is bigger than many countries around the world, so dealing with a large number of staff.

**ROBYN SCOTT:** Absolutely. So traveling East around the globe, the metropolitan government, Tokyo Metropolitan, has created its own private version of ChatGPT, with the goal to using this to increase internal productivity, for their team. And they started using it, in particular to reduce clerical work and help with tasks like idea and text generation.

I think that’s a really, really interesting point that. So it’s being used both to deal with the sort of clerical bread and butter, but also with the higher level thinking idea generation. And that’s a theme we often see too, the kind of flexibility.

In a recent ideathon, they called it, that their digital services team ran, they identified 200 use cases that the tool could help them with. So that’s just astonishing amount of potential applications from one ideathon.

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**OLIVIA NEAL:** And I like that concept of an ideathon, of getting the staff engaged and thinking about where is it going to help them in their day jobs and having again, that bottom-up enthusiasm. And I think these two examples, Portugal and then Tokyo, were interesting contrast because they’re both using generative AI technology, but the Portuguese example is looking at outward facing how to improve citizen service delivery.

And in Tokyo, it’s a real focus on how do we use this to help our employees be more productive, but also as you said, more creative to bring some new ideas and new inspiration, and so different types of approaches. But again, as you say, some similar lessons, which we can come on to in a minute.

**ROBYN SCOTT:** Yeah, absolutely. And a thread we might want to examine is how those different use cases relate to a more a nuanced approach to risk, which I think is an important part of the conversation.

So the last, but certainly not least, example in these magnificent three case studies is now the city of Kelowna in Canada, which has created a generative AI-powered chatbot to accelerate the permitting process for new homes and apartments.

Now, this, if it works well, has just enormous potential to scale because so many of the big cities of the world, and the small ones, just have massive housing crises.

So the Kelowna is one of the fastest growing cities in Canada, facing a significant housing shortage, like many others are. And by fielding thousands and thousands of permitting questions, the chatbot is tackling backlogs and reducing wait times, which has just so many positive implications for the economy, for people’s lives, just to mention two.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And I think the city of Kelowna and the team that are working there seem to be a team who are really interested in actively exploring the opportunities that technology bring to them. And I think that’s something that we’ve seen over time. And I think maybe that’s another piece that comes across in these different studies is the importance of leadership, and having somebody in the organization who is really excited about driving these opportunities.

**ROBYN SCOTT:** A hundred percent, and the enthusiasm for innovation and new technologies was another thread running through these three.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Well, obviously there is a lot more detail on each of these case studies in the report itself, so hopefully people will go in and kind of dial right into that, but we touched on a few things that – that these have got in common. Were there any other threads that you would want to pull out of these three different studies, which show some of the common approaches, some of the common lessons that people have learned?

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**ROBYN SCOTT:** Yes. I think a really important one was the teams being able to share a drive for innovation and curious yet cautious approach to testing the capabilities of generative AI. And as you said, you know, government has such a great stewardship responsibility that being able to be cautious and thoughtful is essential to success.

So that was something all these teams achieved and thought very carefully about and built into the design of these initiatives. They also all – we mentioned iterative already, but they’re all focused on like really small measurable and iterative initiatives before expanding that allowed experimentation, ironing out kinks in a controlled environment, and in the course of that, building trust.

The importance of collaboration came out really strongly from these teams. They all thought about clear communication with their different stakeholders, involving diverse voices, regular meetings, shared sense of purpose. And they all thought about transparency, acknowledging risk, tackling them early on in the projects, again that serving to further trust build.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Yeah, those makes sense. And I think for me, maybe there’s also something in there around, I mean, linking very clearly to some of the Apolitical mission around the skills that people need to build to do this. And I think some of the transparency elements can help build that buy in and help build that trust, but there are some new capabilities that people need to build, both at a leadership level, to be confident in asking the right questions and understanding the tools that are being used, and then at the operational level as well.

And I think some of that comes through experimenting, through piloting, through doing, but I think all the time we’re seeing more opportunities for people to build up those skills to be part of these developments as well, which is really, really hopeful.

**ROBYN SCOTT:** Absolutely. I mean, the capability part of this equation, the equation of the successful application of generative AI in government is so critical and so interesting because you can’t just have top-down rules. It’s not like learning guidelines. You actually have to build judgment. You have to build an understanding of the basics of how these models work to understand the implications of the data you put in and the problems of putting in bad data. That in turn creates capability needs around data fundamentals in government which haven’t fully been addressed.

And then there’s a whole interesting dynamic around hierarchies. And one of the things that I’m increasingly concerned about, but it’s also an opportunity, is how you’ve got an asymmetry where you’ve got this bottom-up adoption and capability and ease with younger generations. And then you’ve got people at the leadership level who are much less comfortable.

Now, I gave the nearly 60% figure across the wider workforce are using it or have used it in some way. Anecdotally, it seems that at the leadership level, senior leadership, it’s more like 20%. And anyone who’s played with generative AI knows that you can’t really understand it in the abstract. And I think if you treat it only as something to be understood in the abstract, it’s much easier for it to become adversarial. Whereas if you’re using it and harnessing it, you understand it, and you also see its benefits.

So I’m really encouraging when I talk to senior people in government, you know, that they should roll up their sleeves and just try it.

**OLIVIA NEAL:**  That’s such an interesting and important point, just the exposure that people have, and how much you invest in your own active learning to stay abreast of these changes, because they’re going to be so fundamental to all of the operations of government as we go forward.

And so we’ve talked a little bit about some of the things that these have got in common. Was there anything in any of these case studies or in the report that surprised you as you were learning more about this space?

**ROBYN SCOTT:** We’ve spent so much time in this over the last year that here weren’t any mega surprises, but the thing that stood out as distinct was the speed. So in the Portugal example, how quickly a team in government, with all the constraints that government teams often have, could improve something is really exciting.

And I think it’s exciting from a service delivery perspective and a government efficiency perspective, right, if you can make things better really quickly, but it’s also really exciting from a second order benefits perspective. Because one of the things I think I will do that’s not talked about that much is the speed of change that it is necessitating is going to potentially change the way that governments operate if they adopt it.

We saw the potential for that with COVID. Whole governments started operating a whole lot faster. They embraced digital a whole lot more. But in many cases, that tide has receded and there’s been a lot of reversion to the mean, and actually, public servants are quite frustrated with that reversion to the mean in many cases.

Now, AI is a tide that generative AI that’s not going to recede. So I think you’re going to get a new precedent set for the speed at which things can be done and improved in government, and that will actually improve government overall, improve its muscle for agility.

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**OLIVIA NEAL:** I think one of the things that struck me was the opportunities that are starting to emerge, and you’re starting to see, particularly in the approach that Portugal are taking to use these types of technologies to serve a broader population, to offer more than a government could before.

So particularly on the languages side, and thinking about how government is able to be more inclusive in the services that it offers, I think that is so powerful. And so you mentioned earlier risk and having a nuanced approach to thinking about risk. And I think that’s something that we often think about and talk about in the government context, and not just in the context of generative AI, but in the context of other technology adoption or any change really in government.

And I think for me, that’s sometimes tied to misconceptions or questions which we maybe don’t know how to answer or don’t have answers to yet. And I wondered if you had any thoughts on both how people are thinking about risk and in these case studies, maybe where they have been able to make progress, how they’ve been thinking about risk, and any misconceptions that you might have come across that need to be addressed along the way.

**ROBYN SCOTT:** Yeah, it’s such an interesting question. So I think just starting with these case studies and back to the point about starting small, I think creating an almost de facto sandbox approach to the initial stages has been really important, because you can then not just have a theory about risks, but you can actually kick the tires on the risk a bit as you go.

So that’s one important piece of it. Also to the communication point, like hearing from different stakeholders and talking to them early to understand, you know, unintended consequences is really important, something that we just see very widely.

And I think we need a lot of work on this is understanding the risks of data, the input of that data, the governance of it, once it’s in a generative AI tool, and then also understanding what is the appropriate use of humans in the loop? Where should you put the humans to have the most efficient effect and the greatest benefits.

So that’s a big area. Just zooming out a bit, I think we need the right kind of enabling governance, obviously globally, and we’re not quite there, but that needs to happen to unlock the power of generative AI in government.

In terms of what this looks like, I like a framework in a paper from the World Economic Forum’s AI Governance Alliance. I’m part of that alliance, and we have a working group on resilient AI governance and regulation, and it’s just come out with three principles, as like high-order principles, international cooperation, jurisdictional interoperability and inclusive governance.

So I think you need something like that at the high level. And then getting a bit more granular again, something that is really important is not treating AI as monolithic because it is not. There are areas of application that are super-risky and super-sensitive, and they are areas that are quite the opposite, where it is sensible to go fast and learn as opposed to being sensible to pause.

And I really think a lot of the disagreements, particularly between different sectors, but sometimes different countries, come down to treating AI and generative AI as too monolithic.

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**OLIVIA NEAL:** Yeah, I think there’s an awful lot there. And I think that World Economic Forum paper sounds really interesting and a useful resource for people to be aware of, so we’ll make sure that we share that as well.

And I think as people are going through this progress, we’ve got three case studies in this report. Of course, there are some other examples of people making great progress out there. I think if we were to be having this conversation this time next year, I think we’d have so many more case studies for us to be talking about. I think that this is kind of the start of this wave of people really seeing what these types of technologies can do for them.

Have you had any insights, or do you have any thoughts on where you might see this trend go next, any areas that people might be exploring or regions of the world where you think adoption might be moving forward?

**ROBYN SCOTT:** I think you’re going to see it everywhere. I don’t think any region can afford not to adapt. I do think there’s some risk about adoption in relatively excluded regions from the AI race.

So we’re thinking a lot about Africa and how we support public officials in Africa to ensure they’re leveraging the technology, because as we’ve discussed, there’s some really powerful use cases.

You’re going to see a lot at the citizen interface level. How do you – how do you leverage generative AI for moving digital services in governments from being efficient and good to being smart, being genuinely smart? And I think that transition is really exciting and important.

It obviously comes with risks that need to be managed. We’ve seen issues before with algorithms penalizing the wrong people, and we should learn lessons from those in this generative AI wave to come.

I think there’s also a huge opportunity in government itself. You know, the government is this giant workforce in all countries. It is this behemoth organization. Often it’s under a lot of pressure to be more efficient. And there are so many efficiencies to be had with the right harnessing of generative AI.

I like its application potential to policy making. You know, when you’re making policy, you’ve got to think through so many use cases in a complex system, and brainstorming with a generative AI tool as your partner can be really good at that if you haven’t done it, I would recommend doing it. It’s really fun.

So, humans won’t be part of that, but I think as an aide it will be really important. And some governments, the UK, for example, is being quite creative in terms of tests with AI and in policy making.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** I think that’s a really interesting example, which actually we don’t touch on in the report, so, maybe we’ll come back to this in the future. That would be one that is really interesting to pick up.

And I think there’s a couple of points that, as you were talking there, just particularly about whether countries get left behind, the ability for developing countries to adopt these new technologies as well, which I think actually, for me, reminds me that it’s really important as we look at these future-facing technologies and how we adopt them, that it’s fantastic to be excited about AI, it’s fantastic to have this enthusiasm for how it can help transform the way that you’re working and improve the services you’re offering, improve the operations, but you have to do the foundational work first. You can’t come to the use of AI in a responsible, efficient way if you don’t understand your data, and if you still have a very legacy technology architecture, you can’t use a lot of these AI tools if you are not embracing cloud transformation. And so I think making sure that those foundational steps are in place, in line to allow this AI adoption is going to be really important.

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**ROBYN SCOTT:** Yeah. Your technology infrastructure needs to be capable. Your people need to be capable, and your organization needs to be capable. And I think you need to think – governments need to think across, at minimum, those pillars.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Yeah, absolutely. And maybe just to wrap up the conversation, we’ve covered quite a lot of bases here. If somebody’s listening to this as a civil servant who’s thinking, ‘I want to move forward with this. I’m excited by the inspiration that is available in these case studies. I see some potential application for us,’ how would you recommend people get started?

**ROBYN SCOTT:** So I’d say, first of all, understand your government’s guidance on the technology. Always best to start there.

Second of all, use it yourself. Learning by doing is always a good approach. It is more important in this than ever. Avoid the generational differences setting in, so make sure your leaders do it. If you’re a leader, make sure you’re playing with it yourself. Get some basic training. We’re offering great training on AI at Apolitical. Many others are as well, so if you need a hand held, there’s plenty there for you.

Join a community. Something we can share, perhaps on the show notes, is a new AI community we’ve launched for government, where there’s just tons of questions addressing all these issues that we’ve covered, opportunities, some really interesting discussions about things like benefits and tax systems and detecting fraud, et cetera, just name one of many, many interesting applications.

And just to emphasize the point that’s already been made, but I think it’s worth making again, like, just make sure you’re working with the fundamentals of digital and data already in place.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Fantastic. Well, thank you so much for your time. Thanks for going through that in such detail with us. We really appreciate it.

**ROBYN SCOTT:** Thank you. It’s been great working together and fun talking to you.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Thank you to our guest, Robyn Scott, and thank you to you for joining me today on Public Sector Future. Visit us at wwps.microsoft.com to find the full report we've been discussing today, as well as more insights and material on generative AI. 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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