**Public Sector Future WWPS Podcast Series**

**Episode 64**

**Talent: Olivia Neal [host], Richard Corbridge [guest]**

**Running Time: 22:00**

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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 Rich Corbridge. Rich is the Chief Digital Information Officer for the Department for Work and Pensions in the UK, which with 100,000 employees, is operating at significant scale. If you're listening to this podcast on the day of release, then you might know that today is Microsoft's annual Ability Summit. In line with that theme, Rich and I are going to be discussing how Department for Work and Pensions have partnered with Microsoft to build the accessibility skills of their employees, which in turn helps them to support jobseekers with disabilities to better use technology in gaining and retaining employment in an increasingly digital workplace.

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

**RICHARD CORBRIDGE:** Thank you very much for having me.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Well, I wonder if we could start off with, just for our international listeners, giving them a little bit of context. Could you share what the role of DWP is, who it is you support, and how large you are as an organization?

**RICHARD CORBRIDGE:** Absolutely. So, the Department of Work and Pensions gets abbreviated down to DWP, one of the UK government’s departments, with a Secretary of State who’s part of the cabinet.

Our job is to support anybody in the UK who has vulnerability in their life. They are out of work, they have disability needs, they need support finding a new job, they find themselves in situations where they need help.

So we are here largely and often seen as a financial benefit element to it, but actually to try and support vulnerability more generally, how do we give people advice who found themselves without a job or need help in the housing market or with bills and trying to find different ways to support that?

The size of us though, in comparison, you could describe a large part of our business as a big bank. So in the last 12 months, we’ve done 202 billion pounds worth of money sent out to vulnerable people. That’s 624 million different transactions. There are 20 million customers of DWP today. We have such a huge amount of users, so 20 million users at any one point in time, supported by 100,000 people who work in the organization, across 800 different buildings throughout the UK. So a really big organization.

Government in the UK describes our estate as being the biggest IT estate across government. There has been some people said that it’s the biggest IT estate in Europe, which is a little bit scary. We have such a large proportion of GDP going through our systems at any one point in time that we do consider a big part of our business to almost be a financial institution.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And your role within DWP, can you share a little bit about what you and your team do?

**RICHARD CORBRIDGE:** Yeah, so I’m the what we call the Director General, so one of the exec team of DWP, with responsibility for digital. And we define digital as being all the traditional tech, tin and wires type stuff, but also all the transformation, all of data, all of data security, information security and governance, our procurement. The team that runs that is roughly 5,000 people now. So it’s a big, big, big department that is trying to find all the different levers to pull to support the whole organization be as effective as it possibly can in looking after people who live in the UK and have those vulnerabilities.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Well, that’s really helpful context for understanding the scale of the opportunities and the challenges that you’re working with.

And so, you mentioned, you’ve got 5,000 people within an organization of 100,000 people. So you have a lot of people in your team, but you’re a small part of the rest of the organization.

And in our conversation, today, we’re going to be talking about accessibility, and I’m interested in how accessibility plays a part in the strategy of DWP and in supporting those 20 million users that the department have.

**RICHARD CORBRIDGE:** Yeah, so accessibility has to be something we consider all the time. Because people who have vulnerabilities often need different styles of access to our systems. And that might be digital systems, it might be people, it might be language, it might be learning issues over the past, it might be just that moment in time where accessibility is difficult.

So we have to find ways that allow anybody who needs help to access help, whether that’s actually physically turning up at a job center, whether that’s on a mobile phone using Universal Credit, one of our systems to actually put in the benefits that they need or looking for a job.

We do such a wide range of skills training, for example. So if you are a citizen in the UK, who hasn’t had technology skills in the past, but want to move into that type of role, you can seek help and advice and guidance from DWP. You’d be in a job center on a specific day of the week. A specific age range of people will be taught different skills and how to use technology to help them build their career for the future.

Microsoft has been a really big part of that, our ability to now sort of launch accessibility training, which 90% of our work coaches across 800 job centers have now been trained in how to offer support in technology accessibility, how to make sure people can understand all the different tools that they need to be able to do their job.

Up to December ‘23, 26,000 people had taken up that training across our organization. So a really big cohort of people have gone forward and said, I need to know how to help people understand what makes technology accessible for them.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And so, I think we’re getting into there a little bit about the Accessibility Fundamentals course, which is one of the ways in which you and your team and other people across DWP have been supporting your employees to better help those who are looking for support from the department.

And I wonder if we could just go a little bit deeper into the Accessibility Fundamentals course. How did you know, or how do people in DWP know that something like this was needed, that employees and staff needed support in this way?

**RICHARD CORBRIDGE:** I think it’s really interesting. It’s clear for a number of different reasons. So I think we’ve looked at our colleague, our workforce and and seen their needs, because they’re coming to us and telling us about the different situations they find themselves in as they’re trying to support customer citizens in accessing our services.

We have a very large proportion of my team requires some sorts of workplace adjustment for them to be able to do their job. And that’s something we’re really proud of that we, as an employer, also look at vulnerabilities. Let’s use that word in its widest sense, and allow people to have the most fruitful day at the office, the ability to support, the ability to deliver.

So I’ve been in the role 12 months, and one of the things I’m seeing a lot of is that the fact that we invest so heavily in accessibility brings a much more diverse workforce, which in turn is creating that diverse view of how do we build our systems, how do we create our systems and support them, so that they are there to be as accessible as possible for citizens of the UK.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And within the course itself that you’re offering and that DWP are offering to work coaches and to people across the organization, what does that entail? What’s included within the course?

**RICHARD CORBRIDGE:** Lots of places that people can go to find additional help is one of the things that I think stands out. It’s signposting where help can be found, where you can point colleagues and customers at to get more accessibility help.

But also even down to the sort of language that we need to use when we’re talking about different tools, so people have some real clarity on what sort of tools they can get access to, and what are the benefits of doing them, even down to how to make them work. We’re a government department, a government agency, and some of the tools require, you know, significant configuration for them to work in a secure manner inside our systems that we have as well. So making sure that everybody can use them to their fullest, know what they are there for, and where to turn to get more help.

But also, I think some of that tailoring, which we found really useful through the relationship with you folks, is being able to sort of take our lessons learned and continuously feed them back in that loop, so that we feel that we are able to find and evolve more the tools that are there, so that accessibility as a journey keeps going.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Are there any particular tools that stand out to you as something where you’ve seen that this is really useful for accessibility, this is something where I can see it making a difference to how people are working or how people are engaging?

**RICHARD CORBRIDGE:** No, that’s a really good question. I think when you’re out in a job center, and you’re seeing some of our work coaches using the whole suite of tools, but actually the thing that stands out the most is their ability to talk to a citizen about accessibility of technology and gives them the knowledge and the confidence in how to do it. So rather than it being one specific thing, being able to really get into how to use the suite of tools together to give them what they need, I think that’s been a really big part of it.

I think the other thing, though, is that ability to look to the future as well for what’s changing and what’s growing, so being able to use spoken word, written word in different ways, being able to help people with partial sight in different ways. You know, simple, simple things in many ways, just how to make sure that you can read the screen when you’re looking at Universal Credit with a customer.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And it sounds like, from what you were saying before, you’ve had really good staff uptake of this type of approach, and people want to engage and want to learn and build these new skills.

Was there anything else that you and the team did to encourage that staff engagement? Was it something that became formalized in a program, or was it more organic than that?

**RICHARD CORBRIDGE:** So initially, it was organic, and it has now become a formalized program. So we have a practice of colleagues across the whole of digital who focus on accessibility, both of our internal systems and our external systems. So they come together across all of the cities where we have offices and colleagues working, and on a regular basis, come together virtually and physically and start to understand what are the next challenges, what are the things we go after.

I love that practice model and the way they’ve become self-supporting in understanding how to lean on each other. The special interest group for accessibility has that duality of looking at what needs to be there for our customers and what needs to be there for our colleagues. And I think that therefore allows that cross-learning of what happens and works for citizens, and what happens and works for colleagues is really clever.

We have taken that model to the British Computer Society, the BCS, and are starting to help them create a special interest group for accessibility and really build the wheels of that, so that across the UK public sector and private sector, we can start to share stories with each other on how to get this right.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And you mentioned earlier, some of the uptake that you’ve seen of this program. Are there any other ways in which you measure the success of this. Is there feedback that you’ve been getting from staff or impact that you see on external users of DWP services?

**RICHARD CORBRIDGE:** Yeah, I mean, it’s training, so we immediately do look for that feedback, don’t you, both by having conversations, by checking those scores, etcetera. So 98% of people rated it as extremely valuable. You know, we’ve got quotes in there about it being life changing for colleagues, that they’ve gone through this accessibility training, that has given them access to tools they didn’t know existed, which makes their day in the office, their day at work so much more fruitful for them, so much more ability for them to offer the services they want to.

Those scores are quite remarkable. You don’t often get that sort of sit and do that training yourself and get those level of high scores. So it’s something the team that are working on iterating, how we do more of that, are really proud of.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Yeah, as they should be. I think that’s really unusual to see that level of endorsement.

And what do you see as the next steps for this program, but also for how you’re thinking about accessibility and technology together within DWP going forward?

**RICHARD CORBRIDGE:** So next steps for me are twofold. So we are, and I’ll use the word advisedly, but we’re obsessed on how we get better and better accessibility inside our organization, so we truly can support that diverse workforce, so that we can allow and facilitate everybody to be the best person they want to and can be in the jobs they do. So there’s a real focus on making sure that that’s something we continue to invest in, we can continue to find time for people as well to do the training, to understand what’s next.

But I think the other side to it is to keep looking at the innovation and change. So what’s the next thing that’s going to become available to truly facilitate a new level of accessibility, and really being really clear on how do we bring those new innovations to bear, both for our colleagues and for citizens that are seeking our help?

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And do you have any thoughts on what some of those next things might be?

**RICHARD CORBRIDGE:** You almost can’t have a conversation about technology without mentioning AI at the moment, can you? It feels like we are on the verge of being able to use a lot more in that space, to be able to do so much more across everything that we do and everything that we move forward with, which is really exciting.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** I think you’ve mentioned working with the British Computer Society and with private sector to share some of the lessons, and I think probably to get inspiration for your own work as well.

Is there work that you do thinking about looking across other government departments even just within the UK government? There’s a number of large delivery departments who have significant interfaces with external users, with citizens, residents, applicants.

**RICHARD CORBRIDGE:** Absolutely, and I didn’t mention that earlier, but yeah, the special interest groups and practices that have been created inside DWP and are reaching out into other government departments. And we have what we think of as a quite special relationship with the Revenue part of government and making sure that those two organizations, we are almost working like that. So twinning organization is how we come together and how we come to deliver in the right ways.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** I think as people who are listening to this, and would be interested to hear if you’ve got any suggestions of lessons learned from how you’ve been rolling out these types of programs within such a large organization, that if somebody who was listening in another country, and as some of the department or a service delivery department could learn from.

**RICHARD CORBRIDGE:** Yeah, lessons learned for us and how we’ve rolled out, how we’ve got the engagement, I think, has been through that capability of the practice itself. So it’s using those people in the different hub cities for DWP, creating that sort of easy, identifiable group of people who are responsible for creating and delivering the accessibility functions of everything that we do internally and externally there. That’s, you know, because they’re identifiable, because they talk so eloquently and with so much passion about the subject, that’s enabled us to evolve and grow and have a really strong identity of what it means to be part of the accessibility practice.

They meet next week in the north of England, and being able to get other director generals to be part of that session, for them to hear and talk to the accessibility team, so that you build that acceptance, knowledge and enthusiasm at the most senior levels, and you see that then permeate through the organization, for me, I think that’s how change and transformation happens more generally, anyway, through that growth. But in this case, in particular, that knowledge has really driven a new way of thinking, which has been exciting.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** I think one of the things that has struck me through this conversation is, although this is a conversation about how digital tools are supporting accessibility, you don’t come across as a digital person, a tech person talking about technology. You’re clearly very integrated into the strategic view of the organization and to working with your colleagues across that whole organization. Is that a part of how you’ve been successful and how the team have been successful in this?

**RICHARD CORBRIDGE:** Yeah, I think it is. We sort of we’ve worked hard over the last 12 months to stop talking about the business as this separate, ethereal thing that exists, and nobody can quite see what it is. When you first start to talk to people, the business, you know, was almost a roller coaster ride of distance away. You never actually got to what “the business” was. By moving the goalposts, a little bit and calling it “our business,” we’ve sort of engendered the fact that digital exists inside our business. It’s not a separate thing we’re serving. We’re not supplier two; we’re part of the solution, and we’re part of transformation. We are problem-solvers at the table when somebody has an issue.

And I think accessibility has led the way in that in some ways as a practice, because it’s really forced its way in, to make sure that everything has to be accessible by design. We stop allowing things to go live that aren’t accessible because of a delay in the timeline or a cost.

So by saying that you can’t take a new product live unless it meets the accessibility standards has really pushed the organization to think about that from the beginning. When you first start talking about the problem you’re trying to solve, you’re ingraining the accessibility of those solutions in at the very start.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And I think a part of making that type of approach work is an appreciation by the rest of the organization of some of the techniques that maybe are more ingrained in a digital team, like starting with user needs and embedding user research and having iterative approaches. I think these are really important foundations, which you’ve mentioned kind of in passing through this conversation, but may not be obvious to people working in other countries where those are not as embedded. Are those things something that you think about consciously now?

**RICHARD CORBRIDGE:** We do, but we also think consciously about trying not to use the words too often as well because it’s just how we do things here. Sort of that product mindset view of the world has become a really strongly, strongly influenced way of thinking, so that people start to have a view of how do I together look at the problem? How do I then iterate not as an IT function or as part of a transformation program, but together in a way that has that user research in there.

And we’ve got a really big user research department across both technology and transformation, and sort of linking that to UX and CX and being able to really get to the point where the customer experience is ingrained in the findings of research, but then that, again, becomes that iterative place of where do we pull all that together.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** And, of course, based on the modern technology foundations that you and the team have put in place and are supporting the change with?

**RICHARD CORBRIDGE:** Yeah, I mean, the effort, as I mentioned, I’ve been here 12 months, we are, I think, the most forward government departments in our cloud migration, in our AI adoption. We have a lot of work to do in how we modernize our data infrastructure, but our technology skills that exist across the department, not just in IT, are really strong, stronger than other organizations of this sort of size that I’ve worked in.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Well, thank you. I think that gives a really rounded shape of both the progress and the incredible uptake and success of the Accessibility Fundamentals Course, and the partnership that’s been important there, and then some of the more foundational work that you and the department as a whole have been moving forward to really bring together those ways of operating. Is there anything that I haven’t asked you, which you would want to mention?

**RICHARD CORBRIDGE:** No, it’s been a really good conversation. I think as we go into 2024 and keep driving forward with our plan for the future, that ability to have accessibility by design in the same way as maybe five years ago we talked about security by design, I would say that’s the way to try and capture this, to really ingrain it in what organizations do.

And I think if you look at that duality of accessibility of customers and the accessibility needs of your colleagues, then you can start to feed both at the same time in a similar way. And I think that’s a real strong tip that we’ve been able to build on a huge amount.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** That’s great. Well, a great place to close the conversation. Thank you so much for your time. It’s been a real pleasure to have you.

**RICHARD CORBRIDGE:** Thank you very much for having me.

[Music.]

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Thank you to our guest, Rich Corbridge, and thank you to you for joining me today on Public Sector Future. Please do check out the Microsoft Ability Summit to learn more about accessible technology, and to hear more real-life stories. The link is on our website, and in our show notes. Please do send us your questions and feedback, you can find me on LinkedIn, or email us at [ask-ps@microsoft.com](mailto:ask-ps@microsoft.com). Thank you and see you next time.

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