

Future of Work Summit 2022 – Welcome Address at London Tech Week

I am delighted to be back with Tech UK today, and thank you Jacqueline for the introduction.

The government's use of technology is a big part of my responsibility as Chief Operating Officer.

I try to bring to this role the 'growth mindset' I learnt when working in start-ups in the media and technology industry.

So, the future of work.

'Find a job you love. And never work another day.'

When I heard this first from a business partner some 20 years ago now, I had to think for a moment what he meant. I realised that for my friend John 'work' was the opposite of play, or family time – it was something you would want as little of as possible. Unless your work was so fulfilling it didn't feel like work. Then it would be like not having to work at all.

I think this tells a fundamental truth about work. Which is that the sense of mission you get from your work is key to whether you enjoy it and stick with it.

It is certainly what keeps me going every day in my current job. And I am sure that is true for almost all of my colleagues in public service. And having worked in business, I know very well how satisfying it can be to build success in the market.

What work we do is as varied and changeable as the world itself.

What I want to focus on today is how in the UK Government we are changing the way we work. And what this means for the public we serve.

Putting the customer – the citizen, business and community first

The first change we want is to put the customer first. This is not original but it is necessary. Governments do NOT typically put the customer first. We provide vital services and respond to crises and develop new legislative solutions – yes. But little of this is designed with the end user first in mind.

The scale of government is such that we add new things without due regard to what we have already. Currently, UK citizens may need as many as 191 accounts – accessed via 44 different sign-in methods – to apply for government services online. On GOV.UK alone, there are nearly 8,000 document-based forms. These are clear symptoms of NOT putting the customer first.

Improving and quality assuring digital services

How is this changing? Most obviously with the move to treat existing users as returning customers. Through GOV.UK it is now easy to renew your driving licence and your passport online. If you are a taxpayer you can make your new return by reference to your previous one. If you are on benefits, your universal credit account allows you to make your claim, maintain oversight of your statement and monitor your to-do list to ensure you retain access.

We have also begun to make it easier for users to find information solutions that meet their needs. When we were helping businesses prepare for Brexit, we provided the 'Brexit checker' where an individual business could describe itself in a few phrases and be served up the relevant rule changes and actions required. When the Covid pandemic was country-wide but patchy we made the latest data on infection rates searchable at postcode level.

And this month we launch a new service called One Log-In. This is a secure and easy-to-use digital identity service which allows people to register to receive multiple services from the government. This will bring some of the convenience we take for granted in the ecommerce world into the world of government.

Also this month we begin performance rating of the Top 75 government services; these will include Apply for Student Finance, Get Legal Aid and Request a birth/death certificate. We will publish the results and we have committed publicly in the new digital strategy '[Transforming for a digital future: 2022 to 2025 roadmap for digital and data](#)' to achieving great service in at least 50 of these services. This will both demonstrate and drive improving service to the customer.

Modern systems for modern government

The second building block in our new digital government is accelerating the move to modern systems. People – not people at this conference – would be shocked to know that we are still using 40 year old systems in some parts of government. Old legacy systems tend to be slow, expensive to maintain, lacking in resilience, difficult to recover, vulnerable to cyber attacks.

We have called time on these old systems and have committed over £2 billion in our most recent Spending Round to overhaul them comprehensively. We are doing this in a pleasingly logical fashion by rating them systematically and tackling the most exposed and inadequate with the greatest urgency. By building new systems on the Cloud with modern standard software components and embedded interoperability we plan to avoid accumulating new technical debt. Smaller scale and faster procurements, using contracts that allow us to reuse solutions across government, will improve value and reduce risk.

Data confident and digitally enabled

What does this mean for the people who work for us?

Focusing on the customer is what our people want to do but we haven't made that easy to do. If the customer data you need is held on multiple antiquated

and incompatible systems, it is not easy to help the customer. If you are not properly trained and equipped to use new systems and data to full advantage, it is not easy to do so. So these things must change too.

And they are beginning to do so.

Take Universal Credit, which has involved moving the provision of six benefits to just one, and automating processes so that manual payments to customers have decreased from 59% 5 years ago to 1.5% today. Automation and better use of data have improved the service individual claimants receive and delivered half a billion pounds in savings.

And take the example of an enterprising DWP official who used his experience from working on the frontline at Salford Job Centre to come up with an idea to reduce benefit fraud and error in self employment cases by matching up returns submitted by construction workers with HMRC data from construction site companies. Thereby highlighting anomalies and prompting the self-employed to correct their returns. Estimated saving of £100 million annually.

We are beginning to push the boundaries and use cutting edge technology. DEFRA's peatlands and data modelling teams won last year's Civil Service Data Challenge. The drying out of peatlands leads to the emission of around 20 million tonnes of CO2 annually. You can reverse this process by blocking moorland drains, but locating them on the ground is a difficult and labour-intensive process. The project team worked out that by deploying innovative AI – using a Generative Adversarial Network (GAN), no less – they could rapidly identify drains using aerial photography. Seriously rapidly – the new tool can map 3500 peat dams in half an hour – much improving the cost efficiency as well as effectiveness of protecting these important environments.

These are examples of how our people are learning to work differently using new technology and the power of data. Allowing them to spend less time on routine manual tasks and more time to work on what people do best – working together to tackle complex issues and deliver great services of public value.

And we will need more of this to achieve our goal of a Civil Service that becomes smaller but more capable and delivering even better results.

Wherever we work

Finally I want to share a couple of thoughts about where we work.

Even before the pandemic we had adjusted to the modern ways of working required to work across multiple sites across the country.

Prison officers, border force staff and benefits office workers are all civil servants with specific workplaces. But the majority, like me, are knowledge workers who mostly work in offices.

If you have a picture of the Cabinet Office – I accept many of you will have no such picture – it is probably of a stately stone building on Whitehall. But we have offices in Bristol, Birmingham, Glasgow, Liverpool, Manchester

and York – just to name some of the bigger ones. Our people now travel less between these places, and rely more on bits and bytes to do the travelling.

By having fewer desks than workers, the Civil Service has saved over £650m in the last five years in reduced office costs.

However I am not an advocate of 'work anywhere'. Even when I worked for an internet company with partners and customers all over the world I found our teams needed to come together in person to reinforce the bonds that support creativity and high performance.

In government nearly all of our work requires multidisciplinary team-working, often between departments and with private sector partners. You can do that online but too much so and we risk eroding the sense of shared purpose, the camaraderie and learning-by-observation.

Like every modern organisation we are fine-tuning to try to find the optimal mix of hybrid working that gets the job done efficiently while still preserving the work culture that attracts people to join and stay, and give of their best.

What is clear is that in the modern Civil Service, we need to operate with a workforce drawn from every community, every demographic, every generation, every profession and trade. And we must offer our people varied, stretching and rewarding work experiences throughout what will be longer but also more fulfilling working lives.

So fulfilling indeed that it may not feel like work at all. Thank you.