

Speech: Matt Hancock speaking at the Association of Chief Executives Conference

Everybody in this room gets out of bed and goes to work to improve the lives of our citizens, the citizens of the UK and in some case those across the world.

And our task is to do that to the very best of our ability. And you can't do anything to the very best of your ability unless you use the very best technology that is available.

And the message that I wanted to give today is the vital importance of renewing that effort to double down on the use of digital technology and in particular data.

We have been talking about digital transformation for some time. We have made progress in certain areas, but the speed at which opportunities are advancing is faster than the speed at which we are adopting them.

So we need to, as the session after this will put it, 'do more for less', and take the enhanced opportunity to deliver improved services for the people who rely on us.

Technology is of course at the heart of many public sector organisations now.

For all of us who believe in the power of technology and in the fundamental importance of public service, this is a very exciting time. And ultimately these two things are two sides of the same coin.

There's three areas that I wanted to touch on today. The first is the importance and value of embracing opportunities. The second is thinking much more about the use and power of data. And third is the importance of the ethical frameworks in which this all sits.

Embracing opportunities

Now, I am a great believer in embracing opportunities when they come to you.

I started life working in the tech sector, and then drove digital transformation in the Cabinet Office.

And now that I am Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, I can see the opportunities right across government.

And I also personally try to embrace them. For instance I introduced my own app.

Thus far we've only got 10,000 people on it, but I often say there are only

two types of people in the world.

The people who are on the Matt Hancock app, and people who are not on the Matt Hancock app yet...

So the first thing I want to talk about is embracing these opportunities and in particular embracing them through the smart use of procurement. So we can save billions of pounds of taxpayers' money whilst also delivering better public services.

The magic of 'more for less' is now very very clear. It is possible, desirable and efficient to improve procurement practices and crucially culture, so we actively look for the very best way of delivering a service or tackling a problem.

Asking the question 'what is the user need?' and then putting the user need first can deliver enormous improvements.

Now as a central government, we've done this in a whole series of different areas. The first of course and most iconic was the gov.uk website, bringing together all of our different websites.

We can now do everything from registering a ferret to getting a divorce on gov.uk. So I challenge any arms length body to tell me that there is not a role for digital transformation if we can improve the service to our nation's ferret owners using digital transformation.

We need to ensure that procurement is simple and does not have burdensome requirements like the need for indemnities, or years of years of accounts, which simply stops the most innovative companies from applying.

And we need to use the innovative frameworks that are available to bring huge advances and improvements.

I was very excited that the Prime Minister this week talked in great detail and with great enthusiasm about the potential for artificial intelligence to transform cancer diagnosis in this country.

The analysis is that it can save over 20,000 lives every year. So we need to also look at what changes are going on outside these walls and think about how we can bring them inside by being open and enthusiastic.

Using the power of data

This leads me onto my second point; the power of data.

The development of AI relies on the underpinning of data and getting the data architecture right for every organisation is so important.

It's important for two reasons; firstly and rather prosaically and mundanely it's important to make sure we fit within the rules.

And you may have heard a obscure EU law coming into force ... Someone might

have sent you an email about it.

But I hope that the GDPR rules will be a forcing mechanism to make people stop and think “Is my data being held in the right sort of way” and “Is my data architecture good enough?”.

Because ultimately the innovative use of data and the protection of people’s privacy is not a trade off.

Because a good structure for how you hold and secure your data can lead to both the more innovative use of data and the use of some of the most cutting-edge machine learning and AI techniques, as well as better privacy and better services for citizens.

So I think we need to be ready to practise what we preach on GDPR, not just to avoid the glare of the Information Commissioner. But because by using our data better we can improve people’s lives and there are legions of examples of how this is being done well.

Real time open transport data from TFL has allowed us to know how quickly it’ll take to get from x to y.

The Environment Agency’s LiDAR programme uses 3D maps and landscapes to model flood risk.

And the Border Force’s analytics programme uses flight information to assess the risk of modern slavery.

There are a whole series of examples across the whole public service landscape.

My favourite is a fire service using data from the Food Standards Agency to predict the risk of fire, an absolutely brilliant cross-cutting use of data.

And the reason they could work it out was that premises with low food hygiene ratings have a strong correlation with a poor fire safety record.

So by using this data they were able to improve fire safety and food standards at the same time.

We want to see the innovative use of data and the use of open data wherever possible.

So not data published through PDFs, thank you very much, but through APIs instead.

Developing strong ethical frameworks

The third point is the importance of doing this work within a strong ethical framework.

Our overriding approach is to bring liberal values to the use of new technology and the Internet. Making sure we support its great freedoms, new

technology and innovation, but not the freedom to harm others.

So getting the ethics right, particularly in the delivery of public services, is mission critical.

We're setting up the Centre for Data Ethics and Innovation, an independent advisory body.

This has a remit to advise government and regulators on the measures we need to ensure ethical safe and innovative uses of data, including AI and other emerging technologies.

And my fear is that the pace of technology is changing so fast, that too often it's outstripped by our ability to develop codes and standards.

So the Centre will recommend changes in policy, setting standards which can come become industry norms in the public and the private sector. I think it's very exciting.

We've also refreshed the data science ethical framework, which is about how to maximise the value of data to the UK whilst also retaining that public confidence.

So making sure we use these new technologies in ethical ways is important.

It's not a trade off, because if we think carefully about how to use the data ethically we'll also be better at innovating in the use of that data.

Conclusion

We've made good progress. I was absolutely thrilled that we've recently been recognised as a world leader in digital government.

It is vital to deliver the best possible services to the public and I would challenge anyone to say their organisation can't benefit from this sort of improvement.

It requires the technology, being open to the world and crucially it requires a culture that embraces change.

And I urge you to look to your own organisations to see what you can do to use this technology and feel the benefits.

Thank you very much.