

TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE EPISODE 15

REBECCA SKINNER

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DAVID PEMBROKE: Hello ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian Public Service. My name's David Pembroke, thanks for joining me.

I begin today's podcast by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land on which we meet today, the Ngunnawal people, and pay my respects to their elders, past, present, and emerging, and acknowledge their ongoing contribution that they make to the life of our city and this region.

Also joining me today is another of the very talented IPAA Future Leaders, who often join me here to ask questions. And today it is Kat Terris, from the Digital Messaging and Analytics Branch of the Digital Services Division of Services Australia. And Kat joins us from her office in the beautiful New South Wales South Coastal town of Shellharbour. Kat, welcome to the programme.

Our guest today is Rebecca Skinner, the Chief Executive Officer of Services Australia, the agency responsible for delivering government payments and services. Now, while Rebecca may be one of Australia's most experienced public servants, having held senior positions in Defence, Prime Minister and Cabinet, and Attorney-Generals, I'm not sure anything would have prepared her for the challenge of starting work as the new boss of a critically important national agency in the middle of a global health pandemic, just one week before one million Australians lost their jobs. And we always have to remember that this was the agency still bearing the strain of having spent several months helping thousands of Australians to deal with the trauma of the country's single largest ever bushfire crisis.

Earlier in the Work with Purpose series, we spoke with Kathryn Campbell, and Kathryn spoke honestly about the challenges of COVID-19, including the moment where the ICT system famously wobbled but also of the great pride she felt in her team, and indeed the entire APS for the way they have responded to assist their fellow Australians.

Well, Rebecca Skinner was in the engine room through all of it. As thousands of staff were redeployed from across the APS into Services Australia. She was spinning plates as the National Cabinet racked up more than 50 policy changes that her team worked tirelessly to implement without delay.

At its peak, the MyGov website, which is the government's digital front door for services and payments, had three million visitors in a single day. The number of claims, normally dealt within years, were being processed in days as Services Australia managed this once in a generation crisis.

With the immediate peak of the health crisis, at least at a national level, now starting to subside, I am pleased to say that Rebecca has found the time to join me in Studio 19. Rebecca Skinner, welcome to Work with Purpose.

REBECCA SKINNER: Terrific, thanks. And thanks to Kat too, who perhaps is working with an "office in a box" maybe down at Shellharbour or a proper Services Australia system. We have got two famous things. One, we had the computer system that famously wobbled, and we also have the rather famous "office in a box", if you can't get into a Services Australia office you can work from home.

DAVID PEMBROKE: We'll come to the "office in a box" in a moment but I was at the minister's speech at the Press Club yesterday where he really set out not just his pride in what has happened, but certainly the big reform agenda that's coming. But I am interested, Rebecca, in you. How are you holding up under this? Because that really must have been something else. That you were getting ready to start this job, knowing that the bushfire crisis was there, but then watching what was coming, it must have been such an enormous baptism of fire.

REBECCA SKINNER: Look, it was. And I think sometimes you may be better off if you just do not know what you are in for. I had spent the summer myself acting both as the Associate Secretary in Defence and acting as the Secretary of Defence through that bushfire piece when Defence actually was in lockstep and working really closely with Services Australia. So, I sort of spent most of January working really closely with Services Australia on delivering that bushfire outcome. So, you felt all of that effort.

And then we rolled into the COVID-19, and I had been working on the COVID-19 response in Defence before. It all happened very quickly. Government announced my appointment on the Wednesday. I think I left Defence that Wednesday night to go home and pause for a couple of days, which really I spent responding to all the beautiful texts and emails I got from people wishing me well in my new role. And I was thinking to myself, "Oh, that COVID-19 thing, this is going to have a big impact." And Kathryn (Campbell) saying to me, "It's going to have a big impact." And I said, "Okay."

So, I rolled up on my first day. And you do the first thing and you welcome the leadership there and you say we are going to all work really closely together and it's going to be terrific. And then by Wednesday you could see that the world was really going to be something different. And then I sat up on that Sunday night listening to that speech thinking, "I think this is going to have a really big impact on me."

And the next morning on the big 75-inch TV that normally plays sport in my lounge room for mainly my husband, he was saying to me, "There are Centrelink queues are on the TV. There is already queues outside. Do you think that's going to have an impact on you?" And I am thinking to myself, "Just maybe it does." And I quickly got to the office and I learned about Services Australia and all the amazing things we could do from that day.

There was a moment where you just thought, "How are we going to get past this?" And what you know at that point is that you will, because tomorrow the sun will come up. So, what do you do? You get all the people you can around you, they know what's going on, you know that you've got a lot of terrific people, and you find a way to marshal all of that expertise, and to accept all the help that people offer you, both from our portfolio, DSS, but across the Commonwealth. And that's sort of how we got started. "Okay, just what are we going to do next? What are we going to do next?" And just keep a really laser-like focus on what the challenge was. And that is what we did.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So, it's not the time for the great strategy ... to sit back and wait, it is time to jump in. But what were the principles that were guiding some of that decision-making that you were holding to, as you were making those important decisions? Not only about supporting the people, but getting the staff ready to be able to respond?

REBECCA SKINNER: So, there was a few things that became clear. Government mobilised around JobSeeker, and then later JobKeeper. That was really important to us because they simplified the policy environment under which we could implement our services.

So, the first thing that happened was we had to relieve the valve somehow on all of the people who were wanting to queue up outside. People felt they had to do something. So, they went to a Centrelink office and they queued up. We did not want that. It was one of the least safe things to do in an environment where we wanted people to stay at home. We pushed our digital offerings.

So, we really did a couple of things. Focused on how to keep people at home, how to keep people on a digital channel, how to get more staff in to help with telephones so that you could get people out of coming to the centre and getting people to feel that they could help themselves. And one of the key things was putting in place that intent to claim, which relieved the pressure valve on people feeling the need to do something.

So, our principals really were, "What can we do for the customer? How do we deliver our service? And how do we make our capacity bigger?" Because that was where we had the famous wobble, the phone lines were out of control. And we really had to somehow break through that.

DAVID PEMBROKE: How do you manage the pressure as it is starting to build? As the system wobbles, as the phones start to call, as it starts to build up. And I am sure there's pressure coming into the ministers' offices and the Prime Minister's office and everyone, it is time to solve the problem. How do you manage that?

REBECCA SKINNER: It was a moment that the leadership team worked as a team. And the best thing to do is acknowledge the pressure, and share the pressure, so that no one person feels more under pressure than the other. Acknowledge that this is difficult, acknowledge that it is hard, but know that, well we are the ones who are here, so we will just keep focusing on delivery.

So, in a sense, there was a lot of pressure, but there was not enough time to worry about whether you were going to be able to survive under the pressure or not. It was about focusing on what needed to be done, and making sure you were pushing that along, and distributing the work out as far as you could so that more people could help you.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Was there a dark moment in any of this? Or did you maintain optimism throughout?

Rebecca Skinner: Well, I am a bit of an optimistic person, so I am often described as a bit glass half full. So, I kept trying to top my glass back up to that half full mark. Look, I did worry when the number of claims on hand got up to that 400,000 sorts of mark. I did wonder whether we could do it, but by that stage we'd got a couple of other leaders in helping us who had a bit more experienced of what bad can look like when the social security and welfare system gets itself into a really difficult place. And they were telling me all the time that, "Actually, no, you're mobilising the right number of people. We are training the right number of people. Don't worry, it will start to come good." And they were right. We did get some other experts in to help model what was going to happen. And that kept us focusing on how many people we needed to push into the pipe and how we needed to deliver the training.

A real challenge for the organisation was doing business a bit differently. It did have more historic models of, "Come in the door, be well trained, go onto the next thing." And I was pushing, and others were pushing models of, "No, just in time training. Just train for this claim type, just train to do this type of phone call. We won't try to train everyone to do everything."

DAVID PEMBROKE: Do you feel that you were well prepared?

REBECCA SKINNER: Look, I have come from Defence. Big stuff happens. Scale happens. So, to the extent that I brought with me a knowledge that if you have a big organisation with a delivery focus, you'll find a way to deliver the outcome that's expected of you. So, that is my glass half full. Because I have been there in a range of Defence crisis'. I was a junior officer when we went into East Timor for the first time. I was there when we went into Iraq. So, I just have this sort of optimism that if you keep people focused, if you've got scale, you can eventually find the path to deliver the outcome.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Now I was, as I mentioned, at the speech yesterday by the minister. And he admitted, as you would expect, that it wasn't perfect, and things did go wrong. But I sort of sat there and thought, "Well, it's almost completely and totally unrealistic to think that, 'Oh, no, everything went perfectly well.'" So, are you concerned in any way that in the inevitable post-mortem that there may be an overemphasis on, "Why didn't you do this?" Or, "How come that didn't work?" And that sort of analysis. As opposed to, "Actually, we did pretty well there."

REBECCA SKINNER: Look, of course there will be that. There is a Senate Inquiry that is being on that is explored a few of those issues, and we are always vulnerable to the revisionist history of, "Why didn't you do X?" And we've participating in an ANAO audit of the implementation of all of the policy and things, and Services Australia is part of that. My view is to try to welcome that. And we do welcome that.

To support myself, we have done a bit of an internal look at the things we did well. And where we could have made sure we managed risk a bit better. We have brought forward a few lessons we can apply as we move through to the next phase, where it is expected to be a bit bumpy and a bit busy as the likely COVID environment policy system is readjusted.

The biggest thing people will criticise you for is, "Well, you're not doing proper risk management." So, what we did do was try to make sure we had a strong governance structure and we captured the decisions that we were taking. And then we can look back about whether all of those decisions were right. And most of our issues will be just to do with, "Did we move quickly enough to be more adaptable around some of the things? And did we capture all of the risks that we could have been looking at?"

DAVID PEMBROKE: Now, one of the great features of this podcast is that we get to hear from IPAA's Future Leaders and members of the committee. And as she was introduced at the beginning of the programme, one of your own.

REBECCA SKINNER: Absolutely.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Kat who is down over there in Shellharbour, lucky her. Kat Terris, I will throw to you now to direct your questions to the boss.

KAT TERRIS: Thank you, David. Rebecca, you just mentioned some reflections that you did with your team on what worked well and what did not work so well, and what we might do differently next time. We found these really useful in my team because we were working on so many different projects. I'm wondering what you did find worked well, and what you would have done differently?

REBECCA SKINNER: I think it is always worth pointing out that sometimes the things that worked well, were things you stumbled into. And some things you thought were going to work well just really did not work well, and so you try to stumble out of them.

So, one of the things I think worked well, which these were partly things we stumbled into. I was new, so I could not go off leading the organisation with all of my deep background because I had none. So, I got the leadership team together multiple times a day, and we worked collectively to solve the problems. That worked well for us. It worked well for us because people got to share the challenges, but also people got to share solutions and help each other, particularly when we had to move workforce around Services Australia. And as soon as you start to move workforce, everybody battens down the hatches and holds tight to their people, thinking that they have got their own outcomes to deliver. So collective delivery was something we stumbled into.

The other thing I think we stumbled into, was that when there is a big crisis going on, one clear authoritative point of communication worked well. And I began about in the middle of the second week, or maybe early in the third week, to communicate every single day to every single person in Services Australia, including all of the workforce that was flowing in from both the broader APS and from service delivery partners and other reserve workforce that we pulled in. So, I found that in the end really successful. It seemed to be able to keep people clear about what the agenda was. And it helped us celebrate a lot of our success, and keep people motivated. And those were areas that I found we stumbled into but were pretty successful.

We took a bit of time to really get an understanding of how to get the workforce working from home. I think now we would have had a better system. There was a bit of innovation had to happen there. And it was a bit tricky to work out exactly what to do with staff.

I think we were not quick enough to accept help in some areas. I was keen to get the help in. Other areas in our delivery system were delightfully confident they could deliver in the emergency like they have always delivered. And it took us a little bit of leadership effort to convince them they had to take some help. We needed thousands of staff to come in. We need other people to help do the recruitment, do the training and things like that.

So they were some of the areas that we got there, but they could have been smoother at the beginning if we'd had probably a bit more of an open approach to getting help and doing things a bit more differently.

KAT TERRIS: A question from Michael Sensei from PwC. It is about physical and mental health and wellbeing. You mentioned you found it useful to share the pressure. I wonder what else you do personally, and perhaps share more broadly, to support wellbeing as well as how future leaders should consider these for themselves in their leadership style.

REBECCA SKINNER: Look, health and wellbeing in a crisis is really important. People can keep going a long time on adrenaline. But it is important to just try and stop and have a bit of a break. So, we put in place some strong work health and safety measures in the offices. We thinned them out. We had the same challenges getting sanitizer and things like that.

For me personally, people in Services Australia will know, I walk my dog, she is called Sparkles, she is slightly odd. And she was a rescue dog from the pound earlier this year. And I have a fabulous exercise buddy, who without fail is on the street corner at quarter past five in the morning to go for a walk. So, I kept up my exercise, that was what was important to me to keep that fitness going. And trying to eat well. So those are the two things I try to do. And try to encourage other people to do as well.

It is okay just to stop. I also will admit to maybe watching some junk TV at some points in time, not completely going to disclose what sort of junk TV I watch.

DAVID PEMBROKE: C'mon name names.

REBECCA SKINNER: No, no, no, that'd be truly..... I will own up to a dog called Sparkles, but not my junk TV. But just to take that 40 minutes to watch something stupid on television that is completely unrealistic is useful. As well as exercise and eat well. When you realising you're drinking a glass of wine, eating chocolate, and you've just had takeaway for the third night in a row, you pause and you regroup, because you know that's not a trajectory that's going to end very well. And get back to a bit of exercise and sparkling water.

KAT TERRIS: Just one more question, Rebecca, from myself. COVID-19 allowed the APS and Services Australia to demonstrate its mobility, as you mentioned before, with staff coming into complete claim processing and answer phone calls. Given that gaining diverse experiences is an important part of career development, do you think that this will help the APS increase its level of mobility and opportunities for emerging leaders across the Public Service?

REBECCA SKINNER: Look, thanks Kat, it is a great question. Our minister yesterday said that, "If service is beneath you, then leadership is beyond you." And I think that it is a great statement. It certainly does help people's career to have been involved in service. We are Australian public servants. We are servants of the people of Australia. It has been tremendous. And I think it will be very helpful to so many people that as Australian public servants we will be able to reflect on a time where we actually helped and served Australian citizens directly. I found that to be one of the most rewarding things. Whether they had been in the APS for five minutes, like all our fabulous grads from across the Public Service, or colleagues that had been in the Public Service for 30 years, everyone said the same sort of thing.

So, we need to look at ways in which we can put service delivery into people's careers because it does connect policy creation with implementation. It gives us all an understanding of what citizens really need from the services that we provide.

And I think that it is energising for people to do something different. And it is great personal development. We all grow if we do something different. And I saw the fear on people's faces when they first arrived down in Tuggeranong. The task was they were going to have to call an Australian citizen. The first task was we were trying to help people create customer reference numbers, and we wanted people to call. And our APS people were in some cases quite fearful of that. But once they were brave and they had a go, and they were rewarded by the delight that the Australian citizen provided back to them, they were onto that next call straightaway.

So, what it really shows is if you are brave enough to try something different, then we all grow, and we all learn. So, I think that's the biggest leadership piece I'd take away. I'd say to people, "We've all heard of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. You need food, you need shelter. Well, we have got those. You have got a job, we have got a nice office accommodation, we will even pay for the heating and it's cold here in Canberra. So, all we're really asking you to do is be brave and challenge yourself to make a phone call to an Australian citizen." And people grew and developed out of that, and they did things they never thought they could do. So, I think it's a great idea.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Well Kat Terris, thank you for joining us from Shellharbour today. And Rebecca, referring to the minister's speech from yesterday, there is certainly not going to be any letup. He outlined a vast programme of work, based on the principles of simplicity, helpfulness, respectfulness, and transparency. He is promised that Services Australia will not be caught flat-footed. So how are you going to keep it up? How are you going to sustain the momentum?

REBECCA SKINNER: Well, we have released our master plan yesterday and into today. We have got a big agenda. One, we've got to focus on service delivery, but we've got to keep iterating that in a way that allows citizens to stay and talk to us online, stay in the digital channel, help themselves, talk to us on the phone. And get past those sorts of old-fashioned ideas of, "The only way to get a service is to come into a shop."

The way we're going to do that is by really taking what the minister calls "sprints", but I'd focus on 90-day chunks of deliverables. So, what are the things that we can inch towards to create a better experience for a customer in 90 days? And it might be that we do half of it in 90 days, and the other half in the next 90 days. But let's keep a focus on ourselves in an accountable way about what we're delivering over a short period of time, and make sure we're improving the customer's experience along those four words of simple, helpful, respectful, and transparent.

And then, as he would say, in the next 90 days we will hopefully get our digital ID up. That would mean you do not need to come into a service centre for us to assure ourselves that you are who you say you are. We will look at digital ways of doing that. We want to get to a point where people only need to come into our office to receive very particular services, and that we allow them to do everything online. And where we can, we do it for them.

So, in the same way that tax can populate your tax return these days, we want to be able to populate the form for people and not have to have them fill it in. And we want people to be able to update their details and all of those things. We want payments to be designed end to end, so people do not receive overpayments and therefore people do not get debt. So, we want to redo that 90-day chunks, sprints, hold to account, clearly have people in charge of those activities. That is how we are going to achieve that over the next two to five years.

DAVID PEMBROKE: So, in terms of your satisfaction as to where Services Australia are at the moment, where would you mark yourself at the moment in terms of your level of satisfaction in being able to deliver that quality of service?

REBECCA SKINNER: I think our quality of service probably depends on particular products.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Okay.

REBECCA SKINNER: We have delivered a really great timely service around JobSeeker. Others of our services are a bit older. So, we tend to roll our KPI up to one big average service satisfaction. So, I'm going to be a bit of a politician here and evade your question. I think we have done well on JobSeeker. I think there are other things where we need to do much, much better. I think we have been a bit slow on some of the tech front. We can manage capacity, but we cannot show a citizen where their claim is up to, so that is bad. So, we can help you fill it in easily, but we can't tell you where it's up to.

So, I think we are great on some things, okay on some things, and poor on some other things. And it is about trying to keep moving everything in a more positive direction so there is a more consistency of service.

DAVID PEMBROKE: With the legacy systems, new systems, the investment, bringing teams together to be able to deliver this very complex series of programmes and algorithms. It is not simple, is it?

REBECCA SKINNER: No, it is not simple. I have a bit of a tech background in my past.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Yes.

REBECCA SKINNER: So that helps me to engage in a rich way with my technical leaders in Services Australia, so I sort of enjoy that. They all learned pretty quickly that bit from way back in my past of being a maths teacher, meant that I wasn't interested in a paragraph, but I wanted a graph. So, we've been much more data driven. And as we move to being technically and data-driven, then we can make more better decisions about where we make our next investments. So, it isn't easy, it's going to take a huge amount of leadership effort, and a lot of consistency. But that is why our master plan helps us focus on what the outcome needs to look like.

DAVID PEMBROKE: A final question to you. What do you love about being a public servant?

REBECCA SKINNER: Oh, I love everything.

I love everything. I am the luckiest public servant alive. I've come from the Defence organisations; I've done all sorts of cool things there. And here I am absolutely delighting in the difference to leading an organisation different to Defence. I was fortunate to be involved quite a bit with things like our future submarine programme, but you have to remain excited on a delivery trajectory that won't see it in the water till 2032.

So, the idea that we could, by the end of this year, deliver digital identities, deliver new online tools, deliver more capabilities, for me, it's the delight of being able to do it now, and not have such a long time. So, I'm just been fortunate to have... My dad was a public servant, my mum was a public servant. My dad once said to me, "If you join Public Service, you will never have a boring job ever." And that is absolutely true to this day.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Well, Rebecca Skinner, thank you for your service. And thanks for coming on to Work with Purpose.

REBECCA SKINNER: Terrific. Thanks very much.

DAVID PEMBROKE: Well played. Get some rest.

Now, ladies and gentlemen Work with Purpose is part of the GovComms Podcast Network. And if you would like to listen to that podcast, which I strongly suggest you do, you will find it by typing the name GovComms into any of your podcast apps and have a listen to that because it will come up.

Thanks also to you, the audience, for giving us some of your valuable time and attention once again. And please share, rate, and review our programme so it can be found by others.

The audience is continuing to grow. We are now in the thousands of downloads every week, which is just spectacular. So, thank you very much. And we do appreciate it, so please pass it along. Your efforts are certainly working.

Thanks also once again to our great partners here at IPAA and the Australian Public Service Commission who have been so supportive in making these conversations happen. Thanks once again to Rebecca Skinner and to Kat Terris down there in Shellharbour.

I am David Pembroke, thanks for joining me. We will be back at the same time next week. But for the moment it is bye for now.

SPEAKER 4: Work with Purpose is a production of contentgroup in partnership with the Institute of Public Administration Australia, and with the support of the Australian Public Service Commission.