

TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

WORK WITH PURPOSE

HOW IS THE PUBLIC SECTOR USING GENERATIVE AI? #84

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CAROLINE WALSH:

Welcome to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian public sector and how it serves the Australian community. My name's CAROLINE WALSH and I'll be your host today, I'm also the Chief Executive Officer of the Institute of Public Administration Australia. In the spirit of reconciliation, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the lands on which we're meeting today, the Ngunnawal and the Ngambri people and pay my respects to their oldest past, present, and emerging and of course, acknowledge the ongoing contribution that they make to the life of our city and this region. I would also like to acknowledge the custodians of all the lands from where anybody is listening to this podcast and joining in this great conversation.

As public services around the world increasingly turn to generative artificial intelligence to enhance the way they write policy and create programs, Australia is no exception. From making copywriting more efficient to consulting on strategy, AI has the potential to reshape the way the public sector operates and delivers for Australian communities. I've been doing some testing and playing with ChatGPT myself, but I'm a little wary of it and I am keen to learn more from our experts today.

While the potential of the technology is vast, it does have some risks and limitations. As it becomes more ubiquitous in the Australian Public Service, it'll raise important questions around privacy, accountability, and bias. In today's podcast, we'll examine how the public sector is currently using AI tools and what opportunities and risks come with the technology and how to leverage it without putting data privacy at risk. Today, we'll speak with two experts in the field to gain insights into the potential of AI and the challenges that come with it. Whether you're a public servant, a policy maker, a policy consumer, or simply interested in technology in society, we're sure that there's a lesson or two for you in this episode.

Let's welcome our speakers today, first up is SALLY BAYLEY-NELSON. Sally manages the AusIndustry Insights team at the Department of Industry, Science, and Resources, the team shares insights about the challenges and opportunities faced by Australian businesses to inform the design of policy and programs. Prior to this, Sally worked on the delivering Great Policy Project at the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, and has also had a range of roles across the climate change and defence portfolios. Welcome, Sally.

SALLY BAYLEY-NELSON: I'm excited to be here.

CAROLINE WALSH:

Great, thanks, Sally. And we also have ANTHONY MURFETT with us today. Anthony is the Head of Division, Technology and Digital, Department of Industry, Science and Resources. Previously, Anthony was the inaugural Deputy Head of the Australian Space Agency where he had oversight of the establishment of the agency as well as strategy, policy, and day-to-day operations. Welcome,

Anthony.

ANTHONY MURFETT: Thank you very much, lovely to be here.

CAROLINE WALSH: No worries. Will we make some jokes about rocket science today?

ANTHONY MURFETT: I think we'll just focus, we'll have plenty of jokes around AI today, but you never know.

CAROLINE WALSH: Enough to keep us going, all right. Well, thank you both for joining us on the episode. So I'm really interested to kick us off by asking you both how you've used generative AI tools for your work so far and what benefits we're finding. Anthony, I might kick off with you if that's okay?

ANTHONY MURFETT: Yeah, thank you Caroline. We're having a look at tools such as ChatGPT, maybe not so much as using them in our day-to-day, but it is more one of the things we need to think about as we explore the tremendous opportunity that's in front of us. You talked about the opportunity, 1 to 4 trillion dollars to our economy over the next 15 years, but you did talk about the need to really manage the risks and be mindful. We're thinking through with input into the National Science Technology Council, led by our chief scientist, on what are some of the underpinning things of where it could be used. And I know later in the podcast we'll talk about what are the risks and what do we need to be mindful around these.

What we would want to do at this point in time, is make sure that we understand the technology and be able to understand the expectations of the community, but importantly, understand the current skillset in the APS and where we might need to provide training and awareness about what is AI because we've had this onslaught of ChatGPT and what it can do. However, not everyone understands what is AI and it can be used very ubiquitously, so again, that awareness part becomes so important because we need to really be underpinned in anything we do with these technologies to make sure we understand the data privacy. But importantly, we want to continue to deliver trusted services and trusted advice to the government at which we serve.

CAROLINE WALSH: Yeah, great point about understanding the community expectations around it as well as understanding that technology. That's great, thanks, Anthony. Sally, maybe you can start us off by telling us a little bit about how you are using AI in your current role?

SALLY BAYLEY-NELSON: I'm coming at it pretty much from the opposite end of the spectrum from Anthony, in that, in my team, we are using AI in our day-to-day work, we've been doing that for about a year so far. So we were on this before ChatGPT was cool and we've already seen some really great benefits. The main way that we are using it at the moment is to help us analyse large amounts of unstructured techs. So in our industry, through our work, we generate heaps of free text information about business issues and how businesses are

interacting with government. And it's my team's role to analyse that information and then share it across government so that we can make better policy and programs and services, and we are using AI to help us do that. So to summarise somebody's long meeting notes into a short paragraph, or to categorise business intel into key themes or topics of interest like manufacturing or supply chains or natural disaster impacts, or to rewrite existing text in a certain style that, say, removes identifying information about a business.

And we've reached the point now where the first draught of one of our weekly reports is automatically generated by AI and process automation. So the robots are coming for our jobs and I'm all about it, there are huge benefits for my team from a resourcing perspective. I've got a small team and the fact that we can automate that first draught saves us about 50% of our workload and it's that lower value processy stuff that frees us up for more interesting higher value, do I say more human work. And also, lets us start to tap into data sets that we just haven't been able to look into when it's just with people's eyes alone, which is giving us more and more sources of evidence that we can feed back into our decision making and the design of our policy and programs. So still relatively early days for us so far, but we've had great results and we've got lots of grand plans for where to next.

CAROLINE WALSH: Fantastic to hear that really practical use that you're making of it, Sally. I did hear someone say the other day that it was like having a brand new APS 4 join the team, so it sounds like you've got a similar experience. On paper, using it should be making things more efficient, but what are some of the limitations that you've experienced in using it in your line of work?

SALLY BAYLEY-NELSON : To be honest, in terms of the technology itself, we've actually found very few limitations. Probably the main one, and it does also ring true with what you just said about having a brand-new person join your team, but the main limitation we've found is that, if the AI model doesn't know the answer or if it doesn't have enough information for the answer, it just takes a lot of creative lessons and sometimes it goes a bit rogue.

An example that somebody in my team told me about just before I came in here was, we had some meeting notes that somebody had entered and, obviously human error, the person entering them had literally just written the word, the, and that was the entirety of the information they put in the system. And our AI model had turned, the, into a Victorian manufacturing business reports positive feedback from customers on a new product it's developing. So as you can see there, AI will generate facts or it'll just make up or misattribute quotes to people or it will create completely new words by mashing two existing words together. Or we've seen some of the hilarious bloopers about, you can't really do maths, but it will present it in a way that is really confident and really quite plausible. So the main limitation we found is, if you're not carefully fact checking everything, you could get caught out.

CAROLINE WALSH: There's some real limitations there, so it's a little bit buyer beware in using it. Anthony, hearing some of those limitations is really useful,

but thinking about some of the risks potentially when the public sector might start using it more broadly. So your division is responsible for providing advice to government on the new tech frontier, including quantum technologies, AI, cyber, and the broader digital economy. What are some of the risks that we might need to be mindful of when working with these technologies?

ANTHONY MURFETT:

Thank you for the question, Caroline. Sally provides some good examples of how AI can be used and also some of the limitations there. And one of the big ones that does come out, and I think you mentioned in your introduction, the bias of data and understanding the data sources, that's one of the big areas you need to understand about where it is bringing information from. And there's two aspects to this, firstly, you need to understand the limits of the data that's in place. For example, in ChatGPT-3, it was limited to pre-2020, whereas new data sources might have more up-to-date information. So the data might not be relevant, it also might have misinformation, and what it does with your APS 4 that we're talking about, it means the APS 4 now needs to understand the data, the bias, and how to recognise whether there is truth in the data. So I think that's one of the areas we really need to have a think about.

And when we are thinking through the other risks, it comes back to the role of government in delivering trusted services and trusted advice to the government of the day. So when we are thinking through, we really need to have that lens about, what are some of the frameworks that can help us manage the risks? So in light of that, it is the privacy, how do we make sure the data is secure? We're dealing with millions of people throughout the year through our services, how do we ensure that data is safe? And we already know the public is well aware of this with the recent data breaches, so with AI coming on board and being used, how do we give that trust and that's that pillar that we really need to build.

Linked to that is transparency, how are decisions made so that there is accountability? It comes back to the principles of working in the public service, that accountability and transparency and how can we use these tools to deliver services or advice, but in a way that is to the expectations of the community? And I think that's the other part, in any of these technologies, we need to make sure there's this real human-centric approach, we understand the implications and the sensitivities and when we're delivering these activities through these new tools. And the last one is also not only just around the data, it's the awareness of who's using the tools. What are the guardrails so we understand what is responsible use of artificial intelligence? Understanding that this is how you use the data, this is where it might be okay, and I think this is the work where the public service and government can lead by demonstrating how we can put those particular aspects in place.

There's an immense opportunity, and I think when you listen to all those risks when you hear the story from Sally on the opportunity, this is where the public service needs to think about, well, how do we balance those risks in a way that we can test the technologies and see where we can develop and be more effective and efficient? Because this can really help us with productivity, but at the same time, how do we go back to the core principles of what we need to

do in the public service around accountability, trust?

And this is pretty important because the other part that I forgot to mention was, of course, the data in that, with ChatGPT uses open source data. Where I think the technology might go in the future, is use the tool of AI but not necessarily on open data, we might find there's actually specific data sets that are created. So you can use the AI on your own data, which means you can trust the source and verify the source. So again, thinking through the evolution of how we use these AI tools, using that type of approach means we can get to a place where we're trusted and we are meeting those community expectations. So those are some of the areas that we are very much thinking about.

CAROLINE WALSH: I like that, being able to put some containment around how we're using it, it's fascinating. Sally, we know there's no formal guides yet, Anthony is just set out to what some of the considerations are in setting out some formal guides. But I'd really love to hear your thoughts about why it's important to have these guardrails, and maybe from a practical point of view, what guardrails you are currently using in your work at the moment?

SALLY BAYLEY-NELSON: I would echo everything that Anthony just said there. And some of the ways that we are managing those risks is honestly just by avoiding them. So questions about data security, everything we do is on a computer server that sits in the basement of our building that is not connected to the internet, so there's no risk of anyone reaching it there. What Anthony was talking about around trust and accountability and transparency and how it's used in decision making, we haven't really grappled with that because this is really just creating a zero draught for us. So everything that the AI does for us is reviewed by at least one, but often more sets of human eyes and we check it, we catch it, we change it, we add context, we assess for risk.

We have had in a very risk averse way for exactly all of those reasons that Anthony outlined because exactly as he said, when I think about how we're applying it in relation to our work, those guardrails are so important because the stakes are so high for us as public servants. If AI makes a blooper when you're having a rap battle in Shakespearean verse or whatever, it's funny and you put it online and everyone has a laugh. But for us, our core business, we're advising government, we're supporting citizens and businesses, we're dealing with sensitive issues and vulnerable people, and that public trust and accountability and holding ourselves to a higher level of scrutiny, it's really important we get it right. So I'm all for those frameworks and checks and balances in place that help us do that.

CAROLINE WALSH: I love that, so taking some risks but in a controlled way. Can you maybe explain for me and maybe some of our listeners who didn't quite understand the bit about it being in the basement? So you are using the generative AI, but it's in the basement, how does that work?

SALLY BAYLEY-NELSON: This gets funny when I tell you that we've named our AI system

Dave, so we keep Dave locked in the basement. What I mean by that is, it's just on a computer that's sitting offline, so none of our information's hosted in the cloud, it's not connected to the internet, so it's not able to be hacked.

CAROLINE WALSH: You've effectively downloaded a version of the AI and put it on a standalone computer and then you can feed your data into it knowing that it's not being picked up somewhere else?

SALLY BAYLEY-NELSON: Exactly. Actually, I was thinking about this when Anthony was talking about older models of these open-source AI being trained on pre-2020 data. We actually found that when we started using this last year, was that the model didn't know what COVID was because it was trained pre 2020 and COVID wasn't a thing. So yes, again, just nodding furiously along with everything that Anthony said.

CAROLINE WALSH: Excellent. Anthony, we couldn't really have opened up a conversation about generative AI without actually giving the technology a go ourselves. So we've used a fairly common AI tool and asked it how it would go about regulating itself and it's given us five main areas to focus on, so I thought I might just outline them.

The first is, protecting data privacy, it says that there should be strict regulations in place to ensure that user data is collected and stored securely. The second is, it says that we should be mitigating bias through training AI on diverse data sets and ensuring that it doesn't perpetuate bias or discrimination. Third, it says we should be transparent about AI's capabilities and limitations. Fourth, it says we should be building an accountability mechanism in case the AI is misused or causes harm. And finally, it says that we should be continuously improving the technology to ensure that it is operating at the highest ethical standards. So what are your thoughts on these things, and do you think the AI tool got it pretty right?

ANTHONY MURFETT: And when you were reading through that list, Caroline, I was nodding, there were several areas where actually it reflects much of the conversation the three of us have had today already. And as I was thinking through those areas, my mind did turn to, well, where did that data come from? And some of the similarities that are there, Australia was leading in responsible AI, has been for many years, and one of the ways we've done that is, we did release eight principles for ethics in the design for AI to ensure it's safe, secure, and reliable. So I'm just wondering, is this ChatGPT here, it's just drawing on some of the work that some of our great people in the public service have previously developed? And so you could say this is where the benefit where ChatGPT and these models and these generative AI can really pull the data and they've outlined the key principles and absolutely, it is around data privacy, mitigating bias.

But there are a couple that were missing that I think is really important to draw out. So we talked about transparency, but there's a fairness principle that we need to introduce and not just accountability, we need to think about contestability and that

becomes quite important with when we are providing advice or delivering services and reliability and safety. I don't know if this is ChatGPT's way of just talking about some of the things, not all the things, so it has a little bit more scope to undertake activities when it's regulating itself, but I think it does do a good start on the key areas that we need to think through.

And to give the listeners context as well, the earlier models of ChatGPT, for it to pull that material together and why it does it so well, is it draws on about 175 billion different parameters. That is a lot, it means it can actually articulate and draw these different pieces of information. So for example, it could come from the document that this department has released, it could come from the OECD and synthesise. The exciting thing about new model, is they're now being trained on trillions of parameters, which is why you're seeing it so fast. And what's interesting is that, these models and these tools are generating outcomes that the providers and developers did not even expect.

And so this brings me to the accountability and the transparency point that was drawn out. And when we've been talking to industry and academics about what is the way forward, it's not just accountability but the assurance because when we think through regulation, it is, do we regulate the technology or do you regulate its use where it can have harm? It's like thinking through the TGIM medicines, we don't regulate the molecule, but we regulate where it's used. Again, we're thinking through these frameworks about, as we think through the principles, how is the best way then to look after the technologies? And where we tend to, particularly when we're in an emerging tech area, this principle braced approach becomes quite important because we need to come to the community's expectations, government's expectations, businesses expectations so that we actually land the right way.

And the other thing that's very mindful, and we're working with the DTI on things like this as well, how do we work across the whole APS who have different user needs? And that means they've got different risk profiles, so how do we work collectively across the service to think through these issues and come up with principles so there is flexibility for different areas being able to deliver services yet embrace some of the great opportunities that are there?

CAROLINE WALSH:

Absolutely. And particularly for organisations that might need to use it when it's not locked up in the basement, fascinating. So I'm going to throw to both of you some practical tips for our listeners, when they're using AI and maybe exploring it and having to think about how it might be able to help them, how might they make the most of the technology but also mitigate some of those risks that we've just talked about, particularly if they don't have access to Dave in the basement where they know it's a safe environment to play with it? Sally, I might ask you to go first if that's okay?

SALLY BAYLEY-NELSON:

Sure. I was thinking about this one and approaching it in a very applied way. My tips would be for how you get from a, this is a really exciting new technology, into, this is something that we're using in our day-to-day work every day. As I mentioned earlier, one of the ways we've done that is by being really strategic about where

we've started. So there are a bunch of areas that we could have delved into that would've been with data that was maybe at a higher classification level or on a separate system. And for all of those reasons that we spoke about earlier, we just went with the least risk approach.

The first tip that I would give would be to look for an opportunity where there is a genuine business need for AI rather than just a desire to play with something shiny. Not that there's anything wrong with playing with shiny things, I love it, and we've all played with ChatGPT, but we've had the most success in applying it and getting good benefits and managing the risks where we've looked for a problem or a process that AI can help with rather than starting from the place of, what can we apply AI to. So some examples of that, we need a call recording transcribed into words, or we need lots of information clustered into key themes, or we need texts re-written in a certain style. And those are all things that AI can do as part of its business as usual.

The bonus points there for practicality, if it's something that you are already doing, because then you've got a lot of training data. So for my team, we've been producing this weekly report for two years already, so we just had hundreds and hundreds of examples of, this is what we started with, this is what we want it to look like. And then we could teach the AI to do it exactly how we wanted it rather than having to go in there and refine it because it wasn't quite hitting the mark.

Probably the other tip I would would be to start small, and this goes to that risk conversation, but also more from a practical perspective. It's really easy to get overwhelmed and then just do nothing, or the flip side, to scope a big massive project that then it takes years to progress and then by the time you actually get to fruition, it's outdated because things are advancing so quickly in this field. So scope something really small and manageable, test it, get it working, that allows you to manage those risks in a really controlled way, add something on, repeat, venture into something else and then that helps you a bit of a build and there will come approach, you build momentum, you build interest, you build support for your work, you can demonstrate that you're managing the risks in a really applied way. And probably most crucially, you can build support from your IT team because they hold the keys to all of the resources that you need for these computing resource heavy models to actually run. So those would probably be my really practical tips on how to get something going while managing risks.

CAROLINE WALSH: Thanks. And Anthony, tips from you?

ANTHONY MURFETT: I've been also thinking about what would the tips be, and I'll start with the way we've been approaching working with SMEs and our small businesses and many other businesses. And we are really encouraging the adoption of responsible AI, we've invested in a centre in Data 61 in CSIRO called the National AI Centre, which is really taking the lead on the adoption of responsible AI through our network. But I think the first tip is, I'd encourage those that are thinking about AI to read the principles that we've released and understand what are those. Because government really can be a

leader here and it's important as we think about these technologies where we're an exemplar in the responsible use of AI.

I like Sally's points around starting small, and we are thinking about, are there sandboxes that we can create where it's a safe environment to do it? Maybe not Dave in the basement, we'll think about them other way, well, what is the way we can put some barriers around and test how this technology evolves? I think that becomes quite important and they're human in the loop, I think there is a sense of this ability to look for data, to look for bias, to understand the data sources. So I think those elements are important and I think it means those that are looking to use AI, making sure they've got the skills and they're building their teams around them with the relevant skills so they understand the implications.

But importantly, I think as you're thinking through AI, engage the executive, talk through what it is, explain the opportunities because the more we build awareness, there's a greater understanding of both the opportunity and how we manage the risk. And I think that's going to be really important because if we don't maintain the dialogue, there can be an aversion to looking at what some of the opportunities are, but we have to do this very carefully in a measured way so that, what are the sandboxes? Start small, work big, let people around you know are working on it and how you are managing the risk. I think that's some of the best things you can do, you've thought through the processes, you've identified where there's minimal impact or it's delivering a service that's, for example, the data is contained or it's generating reports just to show the feasibility.

Using that principle as well, not technology for technology's sake though I know I look after the technology and digital division, but it is very much, where does it make sense to use these particular technologies? And again, reinforcing coming back to what is the role of the public service, how do we make sure we keep those values a democracy meeting community's expectation, but importantly delivering a services to the community and providing advice to government, having those principles in your mind.

And the last thing I'd add, not necessarily as a tick, but as we go forward in thinking about these technologies, there are quips, what does it mean for jobs in the future? I think there's going to be many jobs in the future. There was talk around the internet impacting jobs, I can say that the digital economy and the digitalization of the economy has continued to see digital skills grow, it's around 9% in Australia. Even with AI coming in, it changes the work that we do, there is a recognition around transitioning into new jobs or understanding the technology re-skilling, and that's an important part as the public service we need to embrace as well. How do we understand and train so that we can use these technologies and be that exemplar? And I think that will position us quite well going forward.

CAROLINE WALSH:

Thanks, Anthony. So to wrap us up, Anthony, what are some of your hopes for how AI might be used in the public sector in the future?

ANTHONY MURFETT:

I think there's tremendous opportunities going forward. There's a recent Boston Consulting Group report that talks around process improvement in businesses, and a 10% improvement can result in billions of dollars over years through many of these businesses. So looking at that lens, many are already using AI, for example, designing new drugs, so understanding how molecules interact in the body or how new antibiotics respond. Because AI can use and look at data very quickly compared to humans, they can test a range of different methodologies or different types of chemicals a lot faster than is there. And I know we're not talking about quantum today, but when you combine quantum computing, when it comes here with AI, this just gets turbocharged in what potentially we could do.

We know getting to net-zero is really important, so IOs were used in energy networks to optimise the flow of energy. It's used to design new technologies as well about how to make lithium batteries more efficient, which means it reduces charging time. And again, we're using it in businesses, we're using in Amazon or other technologies each day where it's able to respond to generic questions. So there's all these real opportunities I said, and that's in the economy, so then we turn to the government, where can we use it? And I think again, with the principle of being exemplars around responsible use of AI, there are many areas around looking at data, providing it, and we've got human in the loop looking at new ways and testing our own ideas. Though we spend a lot of time if we're developing policies on what options could be, we've now got a new APS 4 that can test ideas, what do they see? And of course, with the caveat, make sure you're using the right data sources, et cetera.

But in the future, if we have a generative AI on bespoke data that is protected and contained, there's immense opportunities for us really to be more efficient. And that's just in a policy sense, of course, our service delivery areas have immense opportunity to think through how this can be used. But I do leave with that earlier point, always the principles of ensuring we are using responsible AI, trust, accountability, and transparency becomes really important. And working with the community so they understand, and importantly, also working with our executives to explain the technologies and the implications and being very transparent as we go through and play with what is going to be a really exciting time in the future.

CAROLINE WALSH:

That is really exciting. Sally, what hopes do you have for the use of AI in the public sector in the future?

SALLY BAYLEY-NELSON:

I think we haven't made enough space references yet, so I'm going to say this sky's the limit here. But I think there's huge opportunity, exactly as Anthony outlined, for us to use this technology to become a better public service, to better inform our policy and decision making, to better understand the needs of the people that we're delivering services to and making policy for, to better integrate information across government, to work more efficiently and do more with less.

My hope is saving us from some of the sole crushing drudgery that we do and free us up for more of the higher value and more

interesting work. And my team is really starting to scratch the surface of some of these things in the way that we're applying AI at the moment. But my hope is that across the APS, this just becomes part of our business as usual and that we can navigate some of the risks and the limitations that we've been discussing to harness the technology to help us do great things. And that sounds so cheesy, but I really mean it.

CAROLINE WALSH: Sky's the limit, I love it. Anthony, I think you had one more tip you wanted to offer.

ANTHONY MURFETT: I did. As we talked through the principle of trust, bias in data, one of the big opportunities I'd like to see in the future, is how we can use these technologies to address equality and inclusion. We know there is a risk in data sources in continuing a bias that's in the data, and sometimes it's a hidden bias we don't see. So the more we can look at these technologies and understand that at the principle of many things we are doing, we're trying to build technologies and capabilities for the whole Australian community and overcoming the inequality that is there, being more inclusive, how we do it.

And of course, one thing, we look at the voices for parliament this year, but also engaging with our First Nations people, how these use these technologies so we're cognisant of different cultures as we go in? Which becomes really important. I think when you look at AI as the opportunity and awareness of how we engage the community, there's tremendous benefit to overcome some of the barriers we've probably seen in the past.

CAROLINE WALSH: Thanks, Anthony. If we can use AI to address rather than further embed bias and prejudice, that would be a remarkable outcome. That's really hopeful, thanks for sharing that. So that's all we have time for today, thank you, Anthony, and thank you, Sally, that's been an absolutely fascinating conversation.

Listeners, if you want to read some more about the resources that we have referred to in today's show, make sure to check out the show notes. And before we let you go, make sure you connect with IPAA ACT or contentgroup on LinkedIn or by sending us an email to events@act.ipaa.org.au. The Work with Purpose podcast is produced in collaboration with contentgroup and the Institute of Public Administration, Australia, ACT, and we're supported by the Australian Public Service Commission.

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