



GOVCOMMS PODCAST

EPISODE #142 THE 2022 FAST FORWARD

[TRANSCRIPT](#)

TRANSCRIPT

David Pembroke:

As we continue to see the evolution and the change of the nature of the work of the public service to support the elected government of the day, content is a big deal and it's going to continue to be a big deal. And so I expect that that will be a key thing.

Introduction:

Welcome to the GovComms podcast, bringing you the latest insights and innovations from experts and thought leaders around the globe in government communication.

Andrew Bell:

Welcome to the GovComms podcast. My name's Andrew Bell. David Pembroke, the regular host of this enterprise is also here, but in the guest seat, the teaser at the top of the show gave you a little bit of a clue about that. Hello, David, man of contentgroup and podcaster par excellence.

David Pembroke:

How are you, Andrew?

Andrew Bell:

I'm not bad at all. And by way of information, David and I have known each other for a long time, last century actually. So we might get a little bit familiar and/or feisty as we look ahead to the next 12 months or so. And David, it's the, "Or so," where I want to start as we consider what's coming up next. Has the time come or is it with us already to have to step back whether we like it or not, to use a phrase, and for government communicators to start rebuilding the model that has evolved partly by dint or in fact overwhelmingly, perhaps by dint of COVID? And might that take a bit longer than arbitrary 12 or 13 months?

David Pembroke:

Andrew, I think we are on at that continuous evolution, continuous improvement, incremental change. That'll be the way that these models evolve and it'll be driven in the public sector by the demands of ministerial offices. We live in a democracy. The government is elected as the rightfully and democratically elected government. And so therefore they have the right and the privilege to receive services from the public service. So as that they can explain policy, programme, services, regulations, and therefore the public service is going to need to evolve to meet those needs. And what those needs will be is more content, more visual content, more content distributed both online and offline and faster. That's going to be the-

Andrew Bell:

Where does that leave traditional media though, and particularly might traditional media look on and go, "Hold on a minute, this is a competitor?"

David Pembroke:

I don't necessarily think it's a competitor and I don't think it's not to do anything to undermine the role of the media because the media has a particular function, which is to hold the elected government of the day to account and to ask the questions and to challenge.

Andrew Bell:

And it's communications to account too.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, exactly. No problem at all, but where I think the opportunity for government is, is to take the power of digital technology and this democratisation of the factors of media production and distribution because we can now be a media company on behalf of policy, programme, service and regulation. And so the ambition for communication inside government and the public sector should be to better explain and better listened to people such that there is a greater understanding because ultimately, if there is a better understanding, we can build trust because that is a challenge. The Edelman Trust Barometer in Australia this year showed that only 52% of Australians trust government institutions.

So comms sits right at the heart of being able to improve what is an essential ingredient for a thriving democracy. And we do need to address it because it is a big challenge, not just here in Australia, but around the world.

Andrew Bell:

In our review episode, you'll find us talking about a couple of striking examples of success, but government has to continue. It can't just knock the place down and rebuild. How do you manage reconfiguring comms while going day-to-day and those horrible emails dropping, "We need to do a campaign about this," and you look at it and go, "Do we?" How do you manage that?

David Pembroke:

Well, it's hard. I think the first thing we need to recognise is that government communication areas are put upon, they're very busy. There are a lot of demands. There are increasing demands from Ministers and Assistant Ministers and Parliamentary Secretaries who are looking for more content, who are looking for more support. There is senior executives who are looking for similar support for them to be able to carry out their roles, be they external or internal, which again, particularly for the leadership inside the public service, internal communication is a big challenge.

Now, all of these things soak up resources. And what my experience is, is that what happens is that when we get down into the programme areas that there's not too much left over because they are responding at that central area to meet the demands of their customers, their number one clients who they have to look after. So I think where we're headed to is comms area is becoming really centres of expertise, being able to drive capability, being able to build capability across the enterprise and to be able to work with contracted labour forces into programme and policy and regulatory areas, so as that they can increasingly do a lot of it for themselves because the central areas are just not going to have the bandwidth to be able to do it. So I think that's where the change is going to be, but I think that notion of a centre of excellence, that notion of capability building, but also capability building at the edges of organisations.

So where government intersects closely with citizens and stakeholders, that's where the capability is going to have to be developed because of the need for speed. People want information and answers and they want them now. And they're not sort of, okay, if you are, "Oh well, sorry, our approvals processes mean that we've got to go back and up and..." It's going to be too late.

Andrew Bell:

Don't send an email on a Friday.

David Pembroke:

And people will get frustrated and then those frustrated people will then contact direct to Ministers' offices. Ministers offices will communicate going, "Hey, what are you doing?" And so that spiral will happen. So I think a focus on capability building, and that's certainly where contentgroup is going to be putting a lot of its efforts, is really about how do we build internal capability because this isn't an outsourced capability.

Now, people might say, "Don't say that Dave, that you're going to put yourself out of business."

Andrew Bell:

You're changing your business.

David Pembroke:

Changing our business, that's all it is, to meet the needs of what government is because it is... Comms is now going to be a central function, not an end of the line function, a central function and we're already seeing it. Everybody wants more communications. In the digital world, they want more content and they want it now. So we have to work. Our mission at contentgroup is to help government strengthen communities and improve the well-being of citizens through effective communication. That is our mission. That is why we get out of bed every day. That is why we come to work.

Now, to fulfil that mission, if that means we can help by building capability, well, that's what we're going to do because ultimately we believe that that is what is going to be in the best interests of people around the world. And we have a focus not just here in Australia, but we will be looking to try to build that capability around the world. And again, looking at some of the work that the OECD is doing around its operating model and building capability and events and festivals and functions and those sorts of things, we want to be contributing to that into '23. So we're seeing increasing improvement in the ability of government to be able to communicate effectively.

Andrew Bell:

Let's talk about people. Are the right kind of people in government communications at the moment? And how might the characteristics of the people required in this new brave new world have to change? There's no shortage of people coming out of tertiary institutions, but are those tertiary institutions preparing some of their graduates for a career in government communications, which is, sorry to say this, beyond perhaps a nice cushy job with a few launches and a couple of media releases a week? Because that world doesn't exist anymore.

David Pembroke:

No. Well-

Andrew Bell:

Are people prepared for this?

David Pembroke:

Well, I was talking to someone about it just yesterday actually, about life in the public service and this notion of it's sort of an easier, cushier life. Well, they work incredibly hard. So I don't think it's quite as an easy and cushier life but when we get to this notion of what are we looking for, like all organisations, the demand for communication professionals in the government and the public sector is immense and they can't keep the numbers up to it because of this growth in demand, which is coming from, started at Ministerial levels, Assistant Ministers, Parliamentary Secretaries, et cetera. Demand, demand, demand, programme areas, demand, demand, demand. There's just simply not enough people at the moment, which is where I think there's going to be an evolution in the way other people working in policy and programme areas are going to have to acquire the skills of communicators because increasingly into the future, they're going to have to do it for themselves because they're not going to build these monolithic communication teams at the centre of government. They're not going to keep growing. There is an absolute brick on the top of this growth.

And so what that means for is we've got people, a lot of the skills that they have are sort of close relations, but they're going to just need some additional skills that are going to make them better visual communicators,

better writers, better podcasters. And they're the types of skills that we're going to start to see grow, and there'll be a real demand for that type of education.

Andrew Bell:

Is one of the positive aspects of that, that you can sell to a quality candidate for a job? There's going to be an extra bit of job fulfilment here. You can actually be creative and deliver the message and have a job within the public service. They're not mutually exclusive.

David Pembroke:

No.

Andrew Bell:

It's obviously not crazy creative, but you can actually do something that matters and you might ultimately find a job force where people are choosing at the beginning of their careers between going into a News Corp or an ABC or an Australian Public Service.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. Well, it's one of the reasons why we at contentgroup focus exclusively on working at government and the public sector because the work is fascinating and the work is important. And so if you can... There's nothing like it, is there? Going to work, doing a good job and thinking, "You know what? I might've just helped somebody today." So there's real satisfaction I think in public sector-

Andrew Bell:

And it's not pollyannish, is it?

David Pembroke:

No.

Andrew Bell:

It's actually helpful.

David Pembroke:

It is.

Andrew Bell:

Believe it or not.

David Pembroke:

It is. And again, look, I have my friends and you have your friends in the media who sort of look at it and go, "Oh, it's spin and all this. Forget it." I care less for this view that government shouldn't be able to better explain and better listen to stakeholders and audiences, and it's great fun. And so much of the work is so important, which is why I think there is this need, to your point about evolution of the newsroom capability, which is going to grow into these organisations, I think there is going to be changing roles and responsibilities. There is a very big obsession still with the media and set piece, speech writing and those sorts of things.

But what we're going to see, I think is an evolution of, okay, well maybe you are not just in the media team. You are going to be media and we're starting to see examples of this, you're going to have other responsibilities as well. You might have to knock up a blog, you might have to record a podcast, you might have to think about alternative channels. You might have to get something happening for social media. I think

there's going to be a devolving of roles. And I think every organisation will be slightly different given responding to their particular risk profiles and the risk attitudes and appetites of their leadership.

And so everyone's going to be different, but there will be these driving forces of digital transformation, which are going to continue to make the change happen because you can't stand still in this day and age. You have to change, you have to adapt, you have to build skills, and you have to get better at making the best of this wonderful gift that we have, which is this ability to be able to go direct to citizens and stakeholders with useful, relevant, and consistent content because that, in a world that's crazy busy, in a world where a person's most valuable asset is their time and their attention.

Now, they're not just going to sit back and give it to you because you're the government. You have got to earn that. And so that's the big challenge is how do we earn a right to a share of a person's most valuable asset, their time and their attention?

Andrew Bell:

So we've talked about outward facing communications, dealing with the citizen, engaging the citizen. How about the internal comms? It's often the Cinderella, isn't it? And often, frankly, they are worthy rather than engaging, by the numbers rather than in the moment. You've just talked about we need to think about GovComms as a profession. Is there a profession within the profession for internal comms? And if you get that message working within an organisation, there's almost a pencil movement from you building capability within the comms department. So you get light bulbs going off all around the place going, "Ah, that's how we do it."

David Pembroke:

Well, look, I think internal communications is massively important. And I do think it's underdone and underinvested in most organisations, and I'm not just talking about government organisations. I'm talking about private sector organisations, sporting organisations. We don't do enough to continue to tell our story consistent with our vision, our mission, our values, our priorities, the why of why we are here, and then explaining who is doing what inside that wider vision for an organisation. So that creates meaning so people can connect their work to this wider purpose and then they can better understand what's going on.

So the smart leaders, and there are a number of them who are investing lots of time in their internal communications. And I'd call out, and I'll declare an interest, he's a friend of mine, but Andrew Metcalfe, who is the Secretary of the Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries or FF... Is that the right?

Andrew Bell:

Yeah. Either, or.

David Pembroke:

Former DAWE.

Andrew Bell:

Now DAFF.

David Pembroke:

DAFF, now DAFF, invests an enormous amount of time in communicating with staff, but it's not just in a digital way. He communicates in the lift. He communicates by walking the floor. He is forever out there talking, listening, understanding, building that sense of that mission, that purpose, that superpower that government has in its work and really giving great confidence and just enriching and uplifting his people towards... He does a great job and I think he's an exemplar in that space.

Andrew Bell:

Well, it's leadership, isn't it? And one of the key facets of leadership is the ability to communicate in a way that is meaningful.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. But you've got to-

Speaker 2:

And not by the numbers.

David Pembroke:

But you've got to make it a priority.

Andrew Bell:

An authentic.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, but you can't just, "Oh, I'm going to get to this." You've really got to have it in you. And I think increasingly, again, as we look at the challenges of recruitment and retention. Now, here in Australia, the current government is looking to build the Australian Public Service. They want to increase the numbers of public servants, reduce the number of consultants and contractors, which is great. So to do that, if that's the policy objective, which it is, you have to make it an attractive place to work. Now, as an attractive place to work, you want to go to work and you don't want to just be ignored. You want to be engaged in this great adventure, this great mission, this great purpose that public sector has, and it's a huge responsibility.

And it's not just the Secretary. It's the Deputy Secretaries. It's the first Assistant Secretaries, it's the Assistant Secretaries. It's everyone through the organisation. Whereas there's that sense of, "Let's talk, let's open up, let's engage, let's solve problems, let's build high performing cultures," because that's what people want. If people come and join an organisation, it's going to be much easier to retain and to focus and feature on the good news because often in the public service, you're getting belted around the ears all the time about hopeless this, bad this, why did that happen? But there is so much good that goes on inside the public services, not just here in Australia, but all around the world. And I think it's incumbent on internal communicators to make sure that those stories are unlocked and communicated inside as well as outside so people can see the impact of the work that they're having.

So again, in terms of investment, I think there's going to have to be a much, much larger investment made in internal communication, greater capacity, greater capability so as that they can build these high-performing cultures that Australia and other countries are going to need because the expectations of citizens out there is that a government really is increasingly involved in so much, and this is one of the dividends of COVID, is that all of a sudden government is expected to be involved in regulation, in legislation, in the development of programmes. It's everything. So there is this high expectation in the community and for the government to reach that they're going to have to be build these high-performing cultures which are going to attract people, but are also going to retain people, so as that they're just not coming in and bouncing out.

Andrew Bell:

Just one more thing on internal comms, it strikes me just now. We talk a lot about taking risks and managing risk with external comms. Never seems to be a conversation in internal comms. Every question in a town hall is a very interesting question. "I'm glad you asked that," et cetera, et cetera. Every newsletter is deadly dull with a picture of a cupcake morning. How risky can internal comms get? Because if it's not risky as such, but engaging, fun, with an attitude rather than just by rote.

David Pembroke:

Well, it has to be, doesn't it? Because again, people don't just... When they walk through the door to go to their office, they don't just order all of a sudden change that they accept externally, their expectations of a bank, a telecommunications company, a media company. I think when they come to work, there is still that retained expectation that whoever is communicating with me is going to do so in a way that is useful, that is relevant, that is engaging. But to your point about risk, the greatest risk at the moment to different government departments is people and people leaving. That's the biggest challenge at the moment. There are simply not enough people, qualified people at the moment to fulfil the jobs that the current government here in Australia needs across various areas, whether it be in home affairs, in cybersecurity areas, whether it be in defence, where there is a huge growth path that they are hoping to attract. The Department of Veterans Affairs, huge numbers of people that they need to attract and skill and retain.

And so therefore, there is an absolute business imperative to make sure that that internal communication is contributing to an environment that makes people feel welcome, makes them feel engaged, makes them want to bring their best person to work. And if you are not delivering that, there is a lot of other places you can go and work. So it's very competitive out there, very competitive for people because we're seeing skill shortages everywhere. Cyber, for example, I read somewhere the other day, I think it was Stanford University research reports saying there are three quarters of a million people less that need those skills to be able to equip the economy globally to be able to make us more resilient in a cyber sense. So it's hugely competitive for people out there in the private sector and the public sector and internal comms can play a big role in attraction and retention.

Andrew Bell:

I don't want to create more silos, but if we go to our facing comms now, do we need to actually think a little bit more strategically about the same day reacting to that horrible phone call from the editor of The Daily Bugle at quarter to five, to the mob who are doing longer-term? Again, it's the difference between news and current affairs or public affairs as it's called in the United States, and documentary, if you like. Is that another thing we're going to have to think about?

David Pembroke:

Oh look, that is the great challenge. That is the great challenge and it's the eternal lament of people who work in communications inside government, is that they find themselves trapped in this cycle of the response of the reaction of dealing with the day-to-day. And there's not enough time to be able to sit back and plan and be able to be more thoughtful and more creative and more imaginative about telling and releasing those good stories. But I think what needs to happen again is this evolution of the function. So as that you can't just say, "Well, we're just too busy, we can't get to that." You've got to find a way to evolve towards that and that comes with greater engagement, I think across the enterprise. It comes with particularly Ministerial offices, understanding what it is that you collectively are trying to achieve. It comes to that point of resisting... Everything isn't a crisis.

This is the issue of we don't have to do that. Let's just leave that because we're on a path, we've mutually agreed what our approach is. We've mutually agreed what our framework is, so let's just hold steady and yes, be responsive, be transparent, be authentic. But at the same time, don't lose sight of that strategic approach that hopefully you've had time to co-design with important stakeholders, both inside the Ministerial wing and with your leadership and with your teams as well. So as that everyone knows where we're headed, everyone knows where we are going, and therefore we can make better choices about what we do or don't react to.

Andrew Bell:

In 12 months time, if we sit down in this same room and talk about how 2023 have been, how far along the road do you think we're going to be into government communications more resembling what you and I knew and know as a newsroom?

David Pembroke:

There'll be progress, there will be progress. There has to be progress because there-

Andrew Bell:

Will people get left behind or will they be dragged along kicking and screaming?

David Pembroke:

I don't know, probably some people will. Some people won't like it, some people will leave. Some people find change really confronting, and unfortunately we are in a time where you have to be comfortable with being adaptive. You have to be comfortable with learning new things. You have to be curious about what's coming. If you don't like change, you're going to have to get used to it because if you want to stick around and if you don't, well, might be time to go and find... And well, see, the thing is you can't really go anywhere else because they're going to be dealing with change as well. We're in the middle, we're not even in the middle. We're right at the beginning of this continuous change of capability and expectation and priority and need. And so I think everyone has to be a little kind to each other.

I think that's really important is that we're not going to just be able to walk in one day and switch from A to B. That's not going to happen, never happens. Change comes in these little steps, but I think what you do have to do is to grip up a vision as to where it is that you want to get to and be able to make step changes along the way towards whatever that vision that you've defined to be. And that vision has to be co-designed with your leadership, with your Ministers, with your Minister's offices, with your senior leadership, with your division heads, with your branch heads. Everyone's got a hands in the middle, this is where we're heading to and let's charter course and let's hold ourselves accountable for those changes.

Now, it could be in skills, it could be in practise, it could be in results, but you do need to hold yourselves accountable to set some measures about where it is that you want to get to.

Andrew Bell:

And those kind of things need to be included when the next project walks through your door, you have to go, "Right, well, what's your overall view? Where do you want to go? Not just with this, but with everything." Because very often everything is... It's the latest thing. It's unconnected, even within the same project. It's just an event, it's a webinar, it's a conference, whatever.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. And more deeply than that to ensure that things get done, those commitments then need to be integrated into performance plans. So as people are being measured for their performance against what they said they were going to do in this particular area, it's not good enough just to leave it there. You do have to then integrate it into what people are being measured on and being held accountable for in terms of their individual and collective performance plans so as that it actually gets done. So someone knows, "I actually have to do this."

Andrew Bell:

With a result.

David Pembroke:

With a result because I can't go into my annual review because it's there. So we have to take that step as well, which is, again, further challenging, but it's all part of the evolution and it's going to keep... it's coming and it's here and it's going to keep coming.

Andrew Bell:

So the days, perhaps if we want a podcast, we want a video maybe coming to an end, unless you've got a second sentence to make a remark.

David Pembroke:

Well, unless there is a why and for what purpose?

Andrew Bell:

Yes.

David Pembroke:

And connected to-

Andrew Bell:

To which your audience.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. Well, that's from a strategic point of view but then from the accountability point of view, is that you, whatever level it is that you are being held responsible for either the design and delivery of a strategic plan and it's in your performance management plan.

Andrew Bell:

One last thing, crystal ball out. We won't hold you to this.

David Pembroke:

Why not?

Andrew Bell:

Well, we should, shouldn't we?

David Pembroke:

Why not?

Andrew Bell:

Okay.

David Pembroke:

We're talking accountability so I'm happy to be held accountable.

Andrew Bell:

It's a crystal ball. So crystal balls are allowed to be cloudy. Crystal ball out. If there was one thing that you are convinced somewhat, partially, totally will have happened by about this time next year or mid 2024, whatever arbitrary thing we mention, what would that be? Is there something that you just feel has to happen?

David Pembroke:

Skills.

Andrew Bell:

That's recruitment?

David Pembroke:

No. Skills-

Andrew Bell:

After recruitment?

David Pembroke:

Yeah, skills, improvement. I think there'll be a much bigger focus on how do we get better at manipulating the digital ecosystem to better explain and better listen? So I think there'll be a focus on skills, and I think we'll be able to turn around and be able to say, "Yes, we can see that we've gripped up this opportunity," and we're already seeing it. Might have been the previous podcast we were talking about, there's the data profession, there's the digital profession.

Well, as part of that digital profession, I'd say there'll be an evolution and we'll be very much looking at those digital skills. And again, they can be anything from the soft skills of being able to manage engagement and consultation. It could be writing, it could be visual policy skills where you're better able to produce more engaging PowerPoint presentations or place mats. It could be better strategic planning.

And I think we saw from the OECD report, we know where the gaps and the opportunities are. And I do think that again, through demand, there will be this need for more and therefore to do more, you're going to have to equip more people to be able to do it to a particular standard. And therefore, I think that's where the opportunity is as we continue to see the evolution and the change of the nature of the work of the public service to support the elected government of the day. Content is a big deal and it's going to continue to be a big deal. And so I expect that that will be a key thing.

Andrew Bell:

And that's why your company's called contentgroup. You are ahead of the curve.

David Pembroke:

Well, we were so far ahead of the curve. I'll tell you a funny story. In the old days, way back in 1997, I left the ABC, got a voluntary redundancy, one of the top three happiest days of my life. Well, I was going to leave anyway, but I got money to leave. So I sat around in my paisley pyjamas and grew a beard. And my then girlfriend, now wife used to come home and I'd spend the day on the computer like, "Oh my God, look at all this." Because one day in the future, this whole idea that we would all carry supercomputers in our pockets and we would all have this ability to create video, audio, stills text, graphics. And I was like, "Oh, okay."

And so my background was in marketing and media. And so this stuff was called content and I was like, "Oh, that's cool." And so hence we became the contentgroup back in 1997. So I had a business card back in the day and I used to hand it out, and you got to remember, this is back in 1997. Anyway, I'd hand the card to people and they'd go, "Oh, that's nice."

Andrew Bell:

[inaudible 00:33:53]

David Pembroke:

"You are the contentgroup." I'm sort of like, "Well, sort of." But then you'd have to explain, "Yeah, but one day in the future," blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And anyway, so yeah, it's interesting to see the journey of content as a line in a research project way back in 1997 all the way through to now where it's every gala and the pet shops talking about content. But again, this is the capability, it's baked... You have it. If you are working in government, you now have the ability to go direct to citizens and stakeholders. You have the ability to create useful, relevant, and consistent content. It's what you do with that. That is both the challenge and the opportunity, and that's where the skills are going to come in because more and more people are going to have to think strategically.

Which again, the OECD report told us that globally there is an absence of strategic, which is a contextual challenge because people are so busy and there's always so much on, we don't get enough time to think. But then once we move through that strategic realm into the implementation, it's then going to be able to, how can we do this ourselves? Because we just can't keep outsourcing it. We just can't keep outsourcing it. We've got to build the capability into organisations as it's just as we have a finance department and we have an IT department where we are going to have a media department, which is part of our communication function, which is helping us to better explain and better listen to citizens and stakeholders.

Andrew Bell:

Better explain, better listen. Thanks for explaining, and I think I've been listening. David Pembroke, thank you so much.

David Pembroke:

Andrew. Thank you. Thank you. And thank you very much for all your support this year with all of the content that we've been creating here at Content, the grad cast. Hopefully that returns again next year. Work with Purpose with IPA, obviously the GovComms and everything else. So we'll continue down this path of continuing to create content.

Andrew Bell:

And thank you for bringing your crystal ball, cloudy or otherwise, into the studio. And for you listening, thanks so much for your company. Come back for more GovComms during the year. Give us a rating and share the content with your friends, associates, and people you think should perhaps be shown the righteous path of government communications. I'm Andrew Bell. Until our next, cheerio from the GovComms podcast.

Outro:

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