



GOVCOMMS PODCAST

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DIGITAL LITERACY ACROSS OUR POPULATION

TRANSCRIPT

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Patrick Kidd:

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Introduction:

Welcome to the GovComms Podcast, bringing you the latest insights and innovations from experts and thought leaders around the globe in government communication. Now, here is your host, David Pembroke.

David Pembroke:

Well, hello everyone, and welcome once again to GovComms, the podcast that examines the practise of communication and engagement in government and the public sector. My name's David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. Today, my guest is Patrick Kidd who is the chief executive officer of the Digital Skills Organisation, and I will declare an interest here. Patrick is a friend of mine. I've known him for almost a decade. So, if it is a bit familiar today, it is by dint of the fact that we do know each other quite well. Now, anyway, the Digital Skills Organisation or DSO is an Australian government funded organisation which is dedicated to this critical issue of addressing the current digital skills shortage faced here in Australia, but I'm sure as we all know, it's a critical skills shortage around the world. Now, the DSO, its task is here in Australia, and it works in collaboration with employers, with trainers, and with employees to build digital skills and those journey pathways that helped to meet and fit the needs of different employers.

David Pembroke:

Patrick commenced his position at the DSO in October of 2020, and prior to that, he worked for Infosys where he led the programme team implementing a large scale digital transformation programme in Services Australia. From 2016 to October 2020, Patrick was the chief executive officer of the Invictus Games which were held in Sydney, and he also has large and significant training expertise that he has brought with him from a 30-year career in the British Army, and also about 10 years with the Australian Defence Force, and he joins me on the line. Patrick, welcome to GovComms.

Patrick Kidd:

Hi, David. Thank you very much indeed for having me on this particular show. So, and really appreciate the recognition of the work I've done previously.

David Pembroke:

Yeah, no problem at all. So, digital skills, let's go right back to first principles. When we talk about digital skills, what are we talking about?

Patrick Kidd:

I think such a smart question right at the start because I think one of the real challenges in this space is that there is a very inconsistent understanding and comprehension as to what we mean by digital skills. When I think about digital skills in the work that we focus on, we really try to break it down into two areas. I think there is first and foremost the digital skills that we know are needed to build and design the technology that we all use, and that's very much around the technology professionals that obviously we hear a lot about. We see the tech startups, the tech sort of major companies that are now doing so much to sort of drive the economy and its productivity across the board, but the second component that goes with it is the digital skills that we all need to live and operate successfully in the world that we currently live in which of course is dominated by technology.

Patrick Kidd:

So, I very much think around digital professionals and I think around people who need to have the ability to be able to utilise the technology which is now increasingly driving our processes, enabling us to live fulfilled lives, that power really how we operate, how we live, and how we think.

David Pembroke:

So, let's look at both of those particular challenges. The digital skills professionals, what's the challenge there, and is that where the big gap is in terms of building more digital skills to build the software, to manage the hardware to be able to take advantage of their continued digital transformation?

Patrick Kidd:

So, I think the gap is on a number of levels. The digital professional gap is a well recognised one. Some 250,000 people over the next five years are going to be needed to come into the industry, and that really reflects the fact that technology companies now are increasingly large, playing increasingly important roles as a part of the economy, and in essence, we're needing to generate some 60,000 professionals a year to come in to effectively provide that capability, and that's just at the entry level. So, we're not here talking about people sort of going up through sort of the stages of competence and proficiency. So, that's sort of one part of it.

Patrick Kidd:

And then the second part then is around the fact that the nature of work is changing. Technology is being used across all jobs. Nine out of 10 jobs will need people who are digitally literate in the next three years. And so, what we have now is a massive gap in terms of people who've got the digital literacy, so the ability to be able to interact in the world that we currently have, but also to continue to learn as they go forward so that they can maintain that literacy, improve upon it, and the significance of that is massive for companies, for small businesses. If you think of our economy, there are 3.5 million businesses that sit across the Australian economy, 1.4 million of those are sole traders. 4,000 of them employ more than 200 people. 68% of our workforce is employed in small to medium size enterprises.

Patrick Kidd:

So what you have currently is a significant difference between the big companies that are able to really invest in upskilling their people, professional development programmes, making sure that the workforce that they have are connected to the skills that they're going to need to have to power those businesses, the difference between them and then the small to medium size organisations who probably don't have the same ability to invest in the way that the large companies do, may not have the same level of understanding. And then you compound that by then looking into institutions like the National Training System, into our schools when more than half the people who go through our schools aren't even connected to any type of digital training, you start to see the nature of the problem and the challenge that goes with that.

Patrick Kidd:

Here, we are talking about not just the technology companies who in many respects can look after themselves, but still have challenges they have to overcome there, but we're talking here about how to upskill a population, how to upskill employees across every single industry in a range of different roles and functions, not necessarily just in work, but just through life themselves. So, it's a significant challenge affected by many different dynamics in terms of what sort of background you come from, where do you live, the types of family environments that you come from, all of which have an impact upon your ability to understand what you need to do and how you do it. But ultimately the big challenge, the big strategic challenge for Australia here is how do we quickly upskill our population with digital skills because the digital skills actually power the economy. They increase productivity. They enable businesses to sell more, to generate more jobs. And so, this really is a significant issue in terms of how do we enable our economy and the people that sit within it to realise their potential.

David Pembroke:

And, obvious question, how do we do that? Because as you've articulated, almost an impossible problem to solve when you think about the scale of the problem, the dispersed nature of the problem. Whether it's in rural, regional, remote areas, small business, large business, everyone has a challenge. How do you start to think about getting on top of this so Australia can take advantage of these enabling digital skills?

Patrick Kidd:

So, I think the immediate challenge is how do you simplify that problem because it is everywhere. It's a million miles wide, it's a million miles deep, so where do you start. I think there's absolutely a good recognition of the fact that this is something that we need to focus on, but when you look at what we're doing about it, what we do is we lack a strategic approach. We have many, many different initiatives that are running, be it across government or within companies which are, for themselves, absolutely laudable and great initiatives, but what we don't do is we don't scale them, and so we don't roll them out. We spend a lot of time trying to, I think, sometimes seek perfection rather than actually identifying what are the highest priority needs, and then really getting after those high priority needs.

Patrick Kidd:

A classic example is core part of this is almost like it's language and awareness. We tend to find that lots of people are automatically not enamoured by the idea of a digital career, not enamoured by the idea of accruing digital skills, and that's so often because of the language that we use which is impenetrable and tends to talk technology that nobody really understands. So, how do we actually move away from using this complex language to talking really simple language? One of the insights that I sort of I've developed is really sort of looking at research that's being done by MYOB around the small to medium size enterprise area, but there they talk about not about digital skills, they talk about the outcomes of skilling. They talk about the fact that if you are able to use a digital CRM system, you are going to get 30% more leads which will then lead you to 27% more sales. They talk about return on investment as a result of what money you put into your training courses of being 20 to 1.

Patrick Kidd:

So, I think it's about trying to help people to understand what it is they can do, but also to really clearly and simply communicate the value of investment in these spaces that we have to get to. We need to talk less about the technology, more about the impact and the outcomes that go with it. I think when we, automatically, we think about sort of ourselves and where we sit, be somebody who's mid-career or somebody who's just leaving school, and if you don't come out of a science, technology, engineering, or maths background, you probably don't think that you have a career in technology and using those digital skills that you either have or are going to have.

Patrick Kidd:

The reality of course is that when you look across the digital environment, the sort of the numbers of different jobs there is that there is something there for everybody. You need people who can build things from the software side. You need people who can manage things, who can manage complex programmes which involves a different set of skills. You need people who can think about cyber and how to protect things using cyber. There are many different ways of securing employment, and perhaps the most important thing to recognise is that this is as much about your attitude, as well as your aptitude, and it's all about potential, and we need to sort of break the paradigm that says that you have to go through a certain type of education, a certain type of qualification before you can actually seriously consider yourself as being somebody who can have a successful digital career.

Patrick Kidd:

There are opportunities for people who come out of the existing careers who transition very successfully into tech careers, and there are opportunities for people who come from a very broad range of backgrounds in our schools, and that in many respects is the most exciting thing is the fact that absolutely these careers can be made available and open to everybody so long as they're prepared to give it a go. I think the other part of it is obviously the size of the problem. For the technology professionals on their own, 60,000 people a year are acquired. Our training system produces less than 10,000 people across the universities and the VET system. So, we have a massive gap in terms of our capacity to deliver people with the right skills.

Patrick Kidd:

So, we need to think differently about how to train people, how to upskill them, to recognise that there are many different ways of doing that, and have a far more agile system which recognises that, recognises the importance of it so that we really are opening up the pathways to new and diverse talent and making it easy for them to acquire the skills that are going to be needed in the workplace. So, that was a long-winded answer. I hope that was clear enough.

David Pembroke:

No, no, and there's a couple of bits, and there's one, well, there's two pieces of that I want to come back to, and the first of those is just going back to that story that you told around MYOB and changing the conversation and changing the way that we speak about not only the problem, but the benefits of getting on top of the problem and the benefits of the acquisition of digital skills. But whose responsibility is it to change the conversation and how do you get that agreement through the economy that this is the best way for us as an economy to speak about digital skills?

Patrick Kidd:

So, at the moment, I think it's nobody's responsibility, and so as a consequence, we have lots of different initiatives being run in different ways from different government departments, from different elements within the education and training system by employers. And so, I think the first and most important thing to do is to recognise that there's a maturation issue here. The technology world has been around for 20 years. It hasn't caught up with some of the more established professions, and now's the time probably to start to codify the language that helps us to describe what we mean by these skills, to codify the pathways which help to be clear to employers and to learners about where they need to be playing, and to the training providers about where they might play. I think there's an opportunity there, and I think at this stage, what's most important is to align the key players within the sector.

Patrick Kidd:

We're doing some great work with the new Technology Council of Australia who are absolutely leading the charge in terms of focusing upon this issue in terms of what do we need to do to grip this up, but this is a strategic problem. The states all have an important part to play, but the states themselves apply different approaches and use different language. So, if it is a strategic problem, then really we need to be quite clear about what that problem is, what our top priorities are in terms of how we respond to it, and then we need to align efforts and programmes that sit around it. I think if we can get to that, if we can talk the same language, if we can be clear about the priority needs and measure where are we today and where do we want to be tomorrow, then I think we have a real chance to actually shift the dial. At the moment, because we lack that strategic approach, we struggle to really get beyond the first base.

David Pembroke:

Is there anyone that you look around the world and see that they're doing it well?

Patrick Kidd:

Singapore is an absolute standout. They have a very clear and simple programme. They run a range of initiatives. They provide free online training to their population. They have a clear view about where they're trying to get to, and they probably are the standouts. The Canadians are doing some great work, but I think when you look internationally across the board, what you're seeing again is these sort of pockets of initiatives that are being conducted, but nothing that really sort of brings it together and really drives it, and the opportunity for Australia, at the end of the day, we are only 26 million people. We could do this if we decide that we want to do this, and we can recognise that digital has to be treated slightly differently, but also to recognise the opportunity that comes from this which is fundamentally back to the economy and providing a workforce that is able to uplift productivity within our companies which at this particular stage of our existence is so vitally important in terms of powering the economy as we go forwards.

David Pembroke:

So, we've had a change of the Australian government only recently. Are you optimistic that the incoming government understands the opportunity and understands the responsibility about setting that strategic direction and working across government, across sectors to deliver the coherence that needs to be delivered in order for the benefits to be achieved?

Patrick Kidd:

The last government was super focused on it, and they were definitely trying to get their hands around the problem. It is such a multifaceted challenge in terms of the National Training System, the different players, the different influence within that space. So, I think they're absolutely trying to get around that. They created a digital economy strategy of which skills was absolutely recognised. From all of the conversations we've had with the incoming government, I think there is broad alignment around what needs to be done. As I understand it, the new government will have a sort of a jobs round table which I think will start to try to unpack the skill needs, and I'm absolutely confident that digital skills will play through there in terms of a high priority area.

Patrick Kidd:

I think the challenge again is how do you align this very fragmented sort of sector so that we get to a strategic response, and I think that bit, it remains to be seen as to whether or not we're able to take that big step. But as I said, I'm super mindful of the fact that we have probably in excess of 90 initiatives across governments that we know about. There's many, many more out there, all doing individually great things. We really do have to get after the big macro problem which fundamentally comes down to increasing capacity and capability within our training sector and about focusing on making sure that we uplift the skills of the general population which is about our schools, it's about interventions that make it easy for anybody and everybody to access the training that they're going to need to be successful into the future.

David Pembroke:

But it's also, isn't it, the sort of thinking into the future because this sort of digital transformation thing is really only in its very, very earliest stages when you think about what's coming in terms of the next sort of evolving stages of digital transformation, impacted by 5G, 6G, 7G, multisensor, artificial intelligence, machine learning, virtual reality, augmented reality. There's just a whole new world that is just going to continue to evolve. We're seeing it through Web 3, the introduction of Web 3. So, how then do you sort of look back, and it's really a changing of a mindset, isn't it, that this is a never-done job?

Patrick Kidd:

A hundred percent, and so we need to think here not in terms of jobs and the competencies that go with jobs. We need to be thinking about the skills that you need to have to be successful across a range of jobs, over time, across a range of industries. For example, the types of technologies you talked about there, the core skills that you need to be successful in those areas are largely the same. There are bits of technology that shift around the edges, but the fundamental bringing together of the human skills that you need to have with some of the subject matter domain skills that you need to have is ultimately where we have to get to.

Patrick Kidd:

So, the ability to communicate, the ability to think, and act, to understand complex problems, those things are not going to go away. They become more important as we go forwards, as opposed to less important. The different types of things that you learn about a particular software or a particular platform, that will shift and adjust, but the core skills that underpin it that enable you to then be able to interact with those new systems, new solutions in a different way, that's where we need to head to.

Patrick Kidd:

So, we talk very much about the adoption and application of a skills-based approach, and when we think across the range of potential digital skills pathways, we can identify what we think those core skills are, and those core skills have different proficiency levels. They can be clustered in different ways, almost like a library of them. They can be grouped in different ways to meet different needs, but the essence is how do we get to a position whereby we are providing people into our economy who've got the right skills to be able to deliver the outcomes that we're searching for, be it as somebody who's either digitally literate or a digital professional. So, it's getting to those skills, understanding those skills, and carefully focusing upon making sure we're imparting those skills to those individuals so that they are then able to, they've got what they need to be successful, irrespective of where the technology takes them because they know how to respond and how to adapt and then how to sort of be successful in those areas.

David Pembroke:

Patrick, back to an earlier response that you gave to the question where you mentioned about the challenge of how, how do we upskill our teams and what are the best ways to upskill our teams. Now, this podcast is for the benefit of people who work in government communication and engagement. How should those people in those teams be thinking about this skill acquisition, and what is the best way for those teams to acquire the skills so they can make the best use of digital technology?

Patrick Kidd:

That's a great question, David. I think in the first instance, there has to be a sort of a tacit recognition of the fact that no matter what job you're doing, the job itself isn't necessarily changing, but the way that the job is being done is changing, and that then takes you to the idea of value and a sort of a need to recognise that by doing things in a different way, by utilising the platforms that are available to you, you can actually do your job better, faster, quicker, more efficiently,

generate more value. So, I think at the very heart of it is the idea of leadership of any organisation being very clear about understanding the environment that we're in, understanding the speed at which it's changing, and helping them to really appreciate the opportunities that are out there for them if they so choose to become engaged. Without the support of the leaders 100%, it's going to be super hard for the organisation and the people within it to then upgrade their skills as they go forward. So, I think that's a base founding block that has to be put in place.

Patrick Kidd:

We then have to make it easy for individuals to understand what it is they can do to start to shift themselves from where they are today to where they're going to be. And so, that very much is around that there's a plethora of courses out there. So, you can do stuff freely available online that will get people moving quickly. There's a great government programme called Skill Finder which has been set up by Adobe with a full range of different employers who have provided their training courses for free onto a public system, and that can be accessed and can support the individual learning needs of an individual. So the next thing to recognise is the fact that there is stuff that you can do today to actually get yourself moving.

Patrick Kidd:

What then becomes the challenge is obviously is about being clear about what those skills are that you need to have, and again, there are things out there that certainly we've worked on and developed, but also, again, freely available through other platforms which will help people to understand where they are, what's their skills are that they're trying to accrue, and then will then signpost them and direct them to the right types of courses. So, I think sometimes we wait for someone to come along with a perfect training solution. Sometimes that will be necessary, but so often, actually, the help that you need is right there in front of you. You just have to have the confidence to get out there and get it done.

Patrick Kidd:

But I think the idea of being clear about where you're trying to get to, measuring your progress, and absolutely putting in place the solutions that enable people to sort of move through it is the first port of call, and the leaders play such an important part in this, but we also at the same time need to be communicating to all of those people that we're looking to upskill so that they themselves recognise that this is normal, it's reasonable, and it's achievable, and it's durable, and that they have the potential irrespective of the backgrounds that they come from to be successful as they go through the journey.

David Pembroke:

How do you stop it not being overwhelming?

Patrick Kidd:

You have simple pathways. So, in our language, we make the distinction between what we call digital literacy, fluency, and then a professional. So, literacy is about probably the stuff that most of us already do, but there'll be some gaps probably in our literacy. And so, rather than sort of overwhelming somebody by saying, "You now need to go and do a three-month course," actually, why not just assess them, see where they're at today, and then direct them to the right bit to upgrade their skills so that they can reach that standard of literacy. Let's be clear about what that standard literacy is. So, that for me is very much around the simplicity of language. So, make it easy for people to understand where the bar should be set so that they know themselves where they've got to try and get to.

Patrick Kidd:

So, I think that, mechanisms such as that which communicate what these skills are that make it easy for them to access it so they're not having to go and find it themselves, the idea of a standard that they can measure themselves against so they know where they're getting to, I think those are all ways of effectively making it easier for people to engage with it, coupled with the idea of the leaders of any organisation who are going to encourage their staff to upskill themselves in that way. If you can do that, and then you start to see the value that you're now bringing to the organisation because of the new skills that you've got, then I think that's one of the ways in which you start to help people to nudge along.

David Pembroke:

So, from your point of view, what's your big worry at the moment? At three o'clock in the morning if you do wake up, what's the one thing that you think about most often that needs to be addressed in order for Australia to best take this digital transformation opportunity?

Patrick Kidd:

So, I worry about the fact that this is a massive challenge, but it's also a massive opportunity, and what I don't see is urgency and a recognition of the fact that this is a moment in time, and if we pluck off the low hanging fruit, if we identify the one, two, or three things that will have a massive impact on our economy and the people that sit within it, then we lose that moment in time, and we continue to sort of meander along in a way that I think lacks pace. When I think of it from my perspective in this job, we're a lifed pilot. So, our life comes to an end in about 12 months time. So, I'm now thinking about what does it look like in 12 months time and where do we need to be.

Patrick Kidd:

After that, I wonder who else is thinking in a horizontal way about how to bring together this very complicated, fragmented ecosystem. If we can align, if we can collaborate, if we can identify those priorities, then I think we can absolutely, as Australians, I think we have a massive opportunity to be able to be world leading in how we do this, but we need to have a sense of urgency and we need to really get after it if we're going to get there.

David Pembroke:

A final question, are you optimistic?

Patrick Kidd:

A hundred percent. I'm a soldier, David, always. I think there's-

David Pembroke:

Yeah, but you do see the various elements of the ecosystem. There may be barriers at the moment, but clearly, you're seeing that there is intent, there is good will, there is an understanding, but perhaps just as yet not quite that level of urgency that needs to be seen to capture the fullness of the opportunity.

Patrick Kidd:

Yeah, really well put and absolutely agree with that. When you see great initiatives happening right across the country, across the different states, we don't see as much sharing of knowledge across the states as we might do. I think there's a great opportunity there, but there's lots of great work going on. There's lots of great energy coming in from the private sector to want this problem to be fixed because the beneficiaries of this is everybody. There's still some fairly significant barriers that need to be overcome, but if we decide that we want to get after it and to do it, then I think there's absolutely a great prospect ahead of us. But there's lots to be done, and at the end of the day is all about collaboration and an agreement to probably slightly recognise that digital is different and needs to be treated slightly differently if we're going to get to the agility and pace that's necessary to drive the change with the urgency that we've talked about.

David Pembroke:

And sorry, just on indulgence, one final, final question is that you mentioned in 12 months' time that the Digital Skills Organisation as a pilot programme wraps up, where would you like to be by 12 months' time? What would you like to be able to reflect on and be able to say, "We have done this"?

Patrick Kidd:

I'd love for there to be a strategy that the community is aligned upon with a framework of metrics in place so that we understand where are we at so we know where we're going to go to. I'd love for it to be recognised that digital literacy across our population is the most important thing to get moving in the right direction, and I'd love for us to recognise that within our existing National Training System that unless we adopt more agile and innovative approaches which enable digital skills to be delivered through the incredible network of our schools, of our Vocational Education and Training sector, linking to our universities, then we are not going to be able to get to the numbers that we know are necessary to drive the change that's required.

David Pembroke:

Well, Patrick Kidd, the chief executive officer of the Digital Skills Organisation, I look forward to bringing you back onto the programme in 12 months' time to see whether or not there is a strategy, there is a framework with metrics, there is an understanding and appreciation of digital literacy, and whether that agility has been able to be delivered through that National Training System which links to schools with VET and the universities. They're quite clear targets there. So, let's come back in 12 months' time. So, thank you for coming on to GovComms today to discuss this. It's a really peculiar, huge, vast challenge about how do we continue to evolve the capability and capacity of workers around these digital skills so as that we can take full value from that. So, Patrick, thanks for coming on the programme today.

Patrick Kidd:

Thank you, David.

David Pembroke:

And a big thanks to you as ever the very loyal audience of GovComms, very grateful for your continued support, and thank you so much for doing that. If you do find and have the opportunity to go to your podcatcher to give us a rating, a review, always helps because it does help us to be found. So, thank you. If you would be able to do that, we'd be very grateful. Thanks very much to Ben Curry and Olivia Casamento for their support in putting the programme together. We'll be back at the same time in two weeks to discuss another topic relevant to the world of government communication and engagement, but my name is David Pembroke. I will be back in two weeks' time, but for the moment, it's bye for now.

Outro:

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