
InTransition Episode 111 - Liz Jakubowski

David Pembroke: Hello, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome once again to In Transition, the podcast that examines the practise of content communication in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke and thank you for giving up just a short bit of your week, this week to discuss what I find to be one of the most interesting areas of public sector communication.

Today we have a very experienced guest, I think I would have to say, but someone who has range across all sorts of areas in government and is really leading the way in the technology innovation digital transformation space, and who she doesn't know in this part of the world, around this space and the knowledge that we can draw down on over the next half an hour, it's really not worth knowing. She is a real superstar of the Australian digital scene, but before I introduce her, as we start each week it's the definition of content communication. Content communication is a strategic, measurable, and accountable business process that relies on the creation, curation, and distribution of useful, relevant and consistent content. The purpose is to engage and inform a specific audience in order to achieve a desired citizen and, or stakeholder action.

My guest today, it's Liz Jakubowski and I will declare an interest that Liz is a dear friend of mine, but she also has a wonderful background in government relations, strategic communications, policy development, and also technology innovation. She has held senior executive roles at the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, New South Wales Health, NICTA which was the National ICT Centre for Innovation with the Federal Government. She's produced documentaries, technology pilots in media and health, and she is a real connector in this space. She's been working at logistics, knowledge hub, Stone and Chalk with the Australian Internet Industry Association, the Committee for the Economic Development in Australia.

She's also helped establish the National Digital Careers Programme to encourage school students into STEM careers, but at the moment Liz is working at the CSIRO as part of the Data61 Team. She has a great team supporting her there at the moment, with the RIBIT platform which is ribit.net. That's R-I-B-I-T.net. The purpose of the RIBIT platform is to match university and TAFE students with digital skills to startups and to innovative businesses. We, in fact are the beneficiaries of that very matching process, where we have one of our very talented staff members who's just graduated with a Computer Science Degree from the Australian National University. Thanks very much to RIBIT for that, but Liz joins me now and Liz, thanks for joining us In Transition.

Liz Jakubowski: Thank you so much, David. It's just fantastic to be here and what an amazing introduction.

David Pembroke: What an amazing career, you've really followed your nose over many, many years to find probably the most interesting pieces of the digital transformation innovation agenda, and when you found yourself in these different places you've created a massive amount of value. You couldn't say it's been a planned career, could you?

Liz Jakubowski: No, no, not at all. In fact I wouldn't have planned any of these, but I wouldn't have had it any other way. I feel incredibly, incredibly lucky and grateful for the fact that I've had such amazing opportunities to work with great people and to do really, really interesting work.

David Pembroke: You've worked at very senior levels, one of the insights maybe ... perhaps we start with, is that you've spent a lot of time talking to political officers. You've spent a lot of time up there trying to convince people about the benefits of being involved in particular programmes or services or all sorts of different things over the years, whether it be with the ABC or the health or in technology. What's your advice to people about being an effective operator on behalf of the bureaucracy in that political space?

Liz Jakubowski: I think the main thing is just to get into their mindset. If you understand what really most politicians want, and whatever party they're from they're basically about making sure that they're being responsive to their constituency. If it's a minister it's portfolio-based, if you're a parliamentarian with an electorate it's looking at ... ask the needs of the electorate. It's really understanding how whatever you're communicating or trying to get up relates to their particular objective. If you can get align with that then that really increases your chance of making a successful connexion, and getting the outcome that hopefully you and that politician wants.

David Pembroke: But how do you get their attention when we know that they are so busy and they have so many different people coming into their offices at all times of the day and night, trying to capture that share of their attention?

Liz Jakubowski: I think it comes down to three things. The first thing is timing, knowing when the right time to go is critical. If you do it too early or too late you're not going to be as effective than getting it just right. You can pick up what the right time is by the nuancing around a particular issue, obviously you don't go and talk about budget issues the day after budget or a few months after budget. It really needs to be in the right context. I think it's also about understanding apart from your own ideas and you're sort of putting something forward who else they're influenced by. Ensuring that whatever you're putting forward is in alignment with a broader cohort of people who they listen to and think about getting advice from. I think the last thing is to make sure that whatever you're presenting to them is clear, in terms of not just what you want to do, but how to do it.

David Pembroke: Obviously the timing's quite an obvious one, where you've really got to understand how that time's working. I think that insight there around budget is an obvious one, that you really have to hit that the right time and be just astute, I suppose, and aware, but in terms of finding out who else influences them, who else they listen to, how do you discover that?

Liz Jakubowski: I guess it's a 360 sort of approach. It's not that hard. It really is something that is very easily discoverable publicly. It's a matter of you take a particular policy issue and you look at who the key stakeholders, thought leaders are around that policy issue and then you marry that with who is influential for that political office or individual politician. It's really a matter of, I guess, just understanding that. It's not dissimilar to if you've got a child at school who's having particular issues, you'll be talking obviously, one, to the principal, two, to their teacher, three, maybe to some of their friends or the parents of some of their friends. It's really just gathering all the information that's at your disposal and trying to make the best assessment of how you deal with that.

David Pembroke: Where do you get the opportunity to present? You've spoken about the need for clarity, is it important to have visuals or is it important to be short and to the point, to have a well-reasoned argument? What's the best way of getting the message across? Or does it in fact differ given the different preferences of the politician that you're seeking to influence?

Liz Jakubowski: I think 100% the absolute key thing is being genuine and I don't think it's a one-size-fits-all. I've been really, really lucky that all my life I've represented organisations and beliefs that I 100% subscribe to, whatever it is that I've been able to communicate ... whoever I've been able to communicate on behalf on or whatever the issue is it's been in complete alignment with my own values. I've been very lucky from that respect. I think if you are genuine about what you're putting forward to someone it doesn't matter how many slides or if you don't have slides, it really doesn't matter, it's about making that connexion with that person and understanding whether they share that interest or they may be persuaded to your point of view.

If you take that into a broader context, because I guess there are situations where people have to abdicate on policy management they may not have complete alignment with. I guess it would be a matter of just making sure that whatever it is that you're putting forward from a dispassionate point of view, you're making the best case possible to make sure that all the good arguments you can make with that case get up and presented by you.

David Pembroke: Fantastic. That is superb advice and I think people can take a lot from that, because I think that's quite a nice strategic template that people can take away and consider as they shape up their next presentation that they need to make in terms of building support for a particular policy, idea, or a programme or whatever it is. But when it moves from there, and perhaps let's say that you have been successful in being able to convince an audience to your point of

view, just how important is it that you then deliver on what it is that you promised that you would be able to deliver for that stakeholder? How do you go about shaping up a communications programme in support of the well one argument that you put in place?

Liz Jakubowski: I think it's absolutely critical, but you don't overpromise because there's nothing worse than those expectations not being delivered. It's really difficult because sometimes you're not in a position to actually be able to ensure or to supervise every aspect of that delivery. I think what is good is if you aren't able to do that, that you communicate that really clearly and effectively as soon as possible. It's really important that whoever it is that you've got that relationship with who's got that expectation, that they're aware of whatever problems you have that you're having in that delivery, and that you're able to resolve it. It may not always be the case, but I think most people understand that not everything comes out perfectly every time, having that trust relationship underneath it gives you some flexibility around what you end up being able to do. I think at the end of the day it's all based on the relationships that you have and your reputation for being able to deliver what you say you will do.

David Pembroke: Again, you seem to be suggesting the altruism that they can handle bad news, elected leaders can handle bad news, but then what they can't handle is surprises.

Liz Jakubowski: I guess so. I guess that's true and I think there's also a tendency because as funds become more and more competitive, that people overpromise or they don't value whatever it is that they're providing enough in order to get a particular contract or in order to get buy-in from someone. Then it creates a lot of pressure on themselves and everyone around them to try and fulfil that. It's all very much a balance, isn't it, David?

David Pembroke: Do you enjoy that sort of work? Do you enjoy that advocacy work? Because obviously you are often tied up with things that you like, but it's a very gruelling, tough work, isn't it, because it does take time to build that trust?

Liz Jakubowski: To be honest, I really do enjoy it a lot. It's not even work for me, particularly because as I said before I've been incredibly lucky to always represent organisations that I am 100% in alignment with in terms of their mission and their values. A lot of them had been in public sector of course, but for me it doesn't even feel like work and I feel like it's a ... It's such a privilege to be able to communicate on behalf of an organisation and get an outcome that they want. It's pretty good.

David Pembroke: You have had a massive impact, I'd go back to the days of the public record where you saw well, well before other people the potential to broadcast live the goings on, not just in the Chambers of the Parliament, but what was going on around Parliament in a lot of the committee hearings, and a lot of the doorstops, and a lot of what would largely be considered as second and third

tiers of content sources. You had enough insight to say, "Well, hang on, this is going to be value to a particular audience," and it was many, many years ago that you put that together. Just take us through perhaps even ... Let's go back to that example, how did you see that before everybody else, that the internet was going to be able to deliver for much more narrow audiences than it seeks to serve than the all broadcast media did?

Liz Jakubowski:

I don't know if I saw it before anyone else. I think what was ... I guess I was lucky to be in a position of, was having an opportunity to actually do something about it. I'm sure plenty of people say these things all the time, but unlike me not many ... not all of them have had the opportunity. I've had to be able to get in front of someone and say, "Hey, you know, let's join two and two together. You want to do this, we want to do this. How about we get together and try and pilot this and so on?" Again, it's all been because of the luck that I've had in having these opportunities, but getting back to the days of the public record and the early internet, there was a fantastic team of people like Colin Griffith and Anna Finlayson and others, who I worked with at the time, that all shared this vision.

It was a matter of being able to have all those people or small group of people largely who I was working with, but everyone was equally responsible in getting out the public record and really doing something that was quite pioneering at the time. It's nice to reflect back on that time and look to see that we did the first web forums, the first webcast in Australia and that this was really the start of something, a new era that we could really see was going to really change things fundamentally and forever. It's great. It's great to reflect on that, but it's equally great right now to be looking at what we can be doing right now and what we can be doing for the next generation of people coming up, and how we can make things work better for them, which is what my focus is right now.

David Pembroke:

Now we'll come to that in a minute because I really do want to know what is going on in the engine room there in terms of digital transformation? Because you do sit very much at the heart of this innovation agenda within the Australian context around education and digital transformation, but just before we jump onto that, you pointed to something there which I'm also very interested in, and this is this notion of leadership. You have inspired wonderful loyalty and commitments, and performance out of the people around you, what are the secrets of high performance and you being able to get the best out of the people who work for you?

Liz Jakubowski:

That's very nice of you to say, wow, I feel very humbled by you saying that. Look, I think leadership can come from anywhere and I think shared leadership is always a really good thing, particularly when you have outstanding individuals that you're working with in a team. I think also a lot of women probably do it differently because it's not that important to be seen as being the leader, but the greater importance is to make sure that you get the right outcomes. I'm really lucky right now to be working with a team of really clever ... a diverse

team of young and older people. In fact I think we looked at the other day, there's a 35 year age gap between the oldest and the youngest person on the team, the youngest person being 19 years old. It's that sort of diversity that's really fantastic. I feel that it's important that people feel empowered right from the word go, that you trust people to do the job and you build up their confidence.

I had a really nice bit of feedback from one of the people on my team early this year, where he started working for me and we did a sort of a, "Hey, how is it going? You know you've been working with me for six months. He said, "Look, I'm great. I just never realised that I'd be given so much responsibility." I went, "Oh, do you feel like it's too much? Am I expecting too much from you?" He said, "No, no, no, it's just, you know, very few people," and this person's a little bit old and not the 19 year old that's sort of in the late 20's category and he said, "No, no, no, look, you know, I've been working for a few years now and no one's sort of, just you know, enabled me and sort of pushed me out the door and expected me to do all these things." He said, "No, it's a good thing. It's great to have that sort of support and confidence."

I guess that's my style and that works for me because ... and hopefully it works for my team because that's obviously who I am. I think everyone just needs to be authentic to their particular style and it certainly wouldn't work for everyone. I'm sure that if I was working in a portfolio like, I don't know, some government department that is really, really structured and where people expect a lot of guidance and structure, then that wouldn't work. But because I've been, again, lucky enough to work with really, really clever people who are self-initiating themselves and very capable then ... I've been able to work like that, again, it's just been reflection back on the wonderful people that I've been able to work with all my life.

David Pembroke: But then how do you then manage that risk? Because obviously it's not an accident that people are not only empowered to be able to do things, but you've got to make sure that they've got the appropriate skills and they've got the appropriate the attitudes. You must do a fair bit of work, I would have thought in terms of making sure that you've got the right people, which then gives you the confidence to say, "Well, I think I've got the right person to do the job and now I expect them to do the job."

Liz Jakubowski: I think I'm just lucky that I'm getting long in the tooth. It's really what it comes down to, it's just experience and instinct. Well, you must know this that you just get an instinct for people, that they're going to be the right fit, not only for you but for your team. It doesn't really take that much time. It's basically just getting a feel once you meet a person, maybe the meeting, the meeting of the person takes the longest bit of time, but once you've got that shortlist of people, that group of people I think you'll instinctively know who's going to work or not. Well, can I turn it back on to you? Has your experience been that you pick the right people, you get an instinct for people?

David Pembroke: I'm a bit with you. Certainly I've got the processes to make sure that I'm going through what I'm looking for and there's a certain baseline skills that need to be there or experience that needs to go there, but ultimately I think your intuitive sense has to be activated to make those decisions. I think you do have to rely on that often in all sorts of different cases where either you don't take on a project for example because you get a feeling that you might not know but you get that sense of, "Ohhh, actually I don't think I want to be here," and you've got a really ... I think you really got to be in tune with your gut and often trust it and go with it.

Liz Jakubowski: Definitely, it's a gut thing, and I think that that's increasingly what I rely on these days. I spend a lot of my bedtime reading looking at those MBAs in how to be a better employer and a better communicator in all those sort of things for the last 20 odd years or so. Then you sort of throw all that away and just think, "Well, what have you learned," and it's a gut instinct thing that really, I think at the end of the day gets you the right people that you really click with.