Brock Phyland:

Hello, everyone. Before we get started with this podcast, we'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land in which we're meeting today, the Ngunnawal Ngambri people, and pay our respects to their elders past, present and emerging, and acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this beautiful region. We'd like to also acknowledge the custodians of all the lands from where anybody listening to this podcast is also joining us from.

Noel Chan:

I actually enjoy overall working in the activity-based work environment because in the ACT Government we have a number of different work locations having the ABW fitout. So my permanent locations in the city is an awesome building and beautiful fitout. And that way that is I will meet my teammates, we'll have face-to-face catch-up and bigger group meetings, and innovations of getting to solve some problems face-to-face together.

Matt Padovan:

When we established our two large buildings in Civic and Dickon, which are kind of our flagship locations, they were built to function in a specific way, and that was around the idea of having eight desks per 10 staff, but having those buildings operating at more or less capacity every day. Now, COVID changed that. As soon as that happened, we had to contend with social distancing and the like, which reduced our overall capacity of buildings down to about 50% because every other workstation had to be taken offline.

Brock Phyland:

Welcome to Public Sector Unearthed, a Work with Purpose spin-off series about the people who drive grassroots change and reform in Australia's public sector. My name's Brock Phyland, and I'm a director at the Department of Veterans Affairs.

On Public Sector Unearthed, we're putting people and their stories front and centre. Our guests talk about their journeys in the public service and how they're making a difference through the projects they work on, mentoring, communities of practise, diversity and inclusion networks, and the effective promotion of the values and purpose of the public sector.

Right at the beginning, you heard from today's guests, Noel Chan and Matt Padovan. Matt was at the heart of implementing the ACT Flexible Work programme, a finalist at the 2023 Spirit of Services Awards, a journey that covered not only project management, but hands-on work in outfitting flexible workplaces. Noel is an avid user of the ACT Government's Flexible Workplaces, giving her a space to connect with not only colleagues but with staff across directorates. Matt and Noel talk about their passion for public service and tell us about how the flexible workspaces started back in 2015 and where they're up to today. Let's tune into the conversation now.

Today is obviously all about flexible work and locations, but we're still very happy to have this today in person here at the studio at contentgroup. A big welcome to Noel and to Matthew. Welcome.

Matt Padovan:

Thanks so much.

Noel Chan:

Thank you.

Brock Phyland:

Now, this podcast is all about the people behind the great initiatives of the public service, but I want to go back a little bit. Can you tell us about the time you decided you wanted to become a public servant? I might start with you, Matt, if that's okay?

Matt Padovan:

Yeah, sure. So I think like most lifelong Canberrans, I feel like I was predestined for a career as a mid-level bureaucrat, but I really enjoy it. I think that working for the public service, particularly the ACT Government, you get a chance to see how your work can affect the community that you live within, and it's been really rewarding to see the tangible outcomes from that.

Brock Phyland:

Fantastic. What about you, Noel?

Noel Chan:

For me, after finishing my study in ANU, I just want to do some work not just purely doing research and data analysis, and so I want to work in government setting that is closer to the work delivered to the community. So I'm glad to join the ACT Government to deliver something to contribute to Canberra's communities.

Brock Phyland:

Fantastic. It's brilliant to have, I guess, some ACT representation here today, so I'm really excited to see where the conversation takes us.

So Matt, flexible working is much more common nowadays, but your project in fact started in 2015, so well before COVID-19 forced all organisations to adapt. But how did that original project start out and what were we hoping to achieve?

Matt Padovan:

Sure. So I joined the team as that project was, I guess nearing maturity. When I'm talking that project, I'm talking about an activity-based working pilot. So back in 2015, the ACT Government got some seed funding to make a activity-based work pilot or to test an activity-based work pilot to determine whether or not it was a model that could work within a public service context.

So when I joined the team, they'd just finished refurbishing an entire floor and went straight into the process of measuring and evaluating how that worked. And what we found is that it was a very successful programme. So we took that forward. That became the presumptive model for all accommodation fit-outs going forward. And it kind of built from there, from a small pilot involving 300-odd staff to expanding to 3,000 staff by 2020.

Now, the work that we did was around three principles of people, technology, and place. So it wasn't just about building buildings to enable flexible working, it was also about the cultural uplift that we needed to coordinate and drive to get people working and thinking about flexible working.

All of this served us really well come 2020 when the pandemic set in, where we have observed that many of our counterparts in other jurisdictions struggled to quickly adapt, the ACT Government was really, really well-prepared. We were able to maintain business continuity with no significant disruption when we were all directed to work from home.

And that I think is one of the most rewarding things about this programme for me because I think in the early days of the project, I jokingly referred to myself as the most hated men in government because I was the guy that was taking people's desks away from them and trying to show them the benefits of working flexibly when at times they were only seeing what they'd lost. And I think having been through that journey, I think that people really appreciate now the level of flexibility that they now have and it's become a real point of attraction for staff to come to the service.

Brock Phyland:

Absolutely, and I think ACT Government seems to have been at the forefront of this work, and that project just speaks to that as well. So you had done the work and had, I guess the bedrock there ready to go, so not surprised that you were streets ahead of the rest when it came to it.

Matt Padovan:

We've seen some really beautiful fitouts that have been done across other jurisdictions, and what's happened is after a short period of time, they've gone back to the old ways of working. So you now have people working in an office environment that's no longer fit for that design purpose. And that, I wouldn't say that it frustrates me, but it's a little bit sad to see that you've had such a huge investment in creating a new culture and it just doesn't translate.

Noel Chan:

From my perspective because I used to work in Nara in the facility team, have a chance to met and Peter to roll out the project bit by bit in different office location. I think the lesson learned to build into the next journey of that is very important just from my perspective. And because at that time I think there's cultural change, especially some of the execs will lose their office or some of the area they feel they're dealing more sensitive information so they will find challenge to be in an open environment and how to cater their needs. I think that is something I think Matt's team have been addressing in putting different small room they can walk into picking a phone call to resolve issues. I think, yeah.

Matt Padovan:

In what we're rolling out at the moment, it's very much the end state after a very lengthy iterative design process. We made a lot of mistakes along the way and we own that. We had to try things, we had to experiment and see what we threw to the wall and what stuck and what didn't stick. But what we have now is a very mature concept that works very well for our service and we're constantly reviewing that and looking at what we need to do.

And I think what COVID showed us is that the way people use the office has changed. It's not about coming into the office to do focus work. People choose to do that from home, right? It's all about how we can incentivize people to come into the office to work together. And we've been looking at different settings to encourage that. So we've got a very large innovation centre, which has a range of settings wholly designed about bringing people together. So these aren't permanent desks where people would set up for lengthy periods of time. This is all about coming together for innovative workshops and trying to find solutions for the problems facing our community.

We also have a family-friendly space. So that is where if you have caring responsibilities and for whatever reason what structures you might have in place may have fallen through, so the daycare might've closed down or the grandparents may not be available, you've got somewhere now where you can bring the person in your care into that office. They can work alongside you or play alongside you. So it's a very, very safe environment we've created to support that. But what that means is that staff no longer need to take personal days to accommodate or to care for that individual. So they might not be as 100% productive as they might be otherwise, but it's a way that they can continue to engage with work while having these extenuating circumstances pressing in on them.

Where we had pockets of resistance, people that weren't necessarily on board with what we were doing, I think now if you ask them how they find working in this way and have them look back to how things were 10 years ago, they might look and say, "Oh, actually things have improved significantly for me."

Brock Phyland:

Yeah.

Noel Chan:

My experience, at least in 2020, the fitout is because we actually don't have... We have the lift, but we don't have door for a traditional office. To different department, you need to open the door, you walk in and say, "Oh, that is the Treasury," or walk in another department. So it is super open environment. You have the stair to connect every single floor other than really restricted for the nature of work. Other area you can just feel free to walk through. I think that kind of connections and I really enjoy, say I can just walk to say hi to someone in Treasury and then we can just say, This is what I'm doing, so can I see some advice." We don't feel getting to that big department feeling.

Matt Padovan:

Yeah, we do have some secure areas. So we have our Community Services Directorate have Child, Youth and Protective Services Agency. So those areas, due to the nature of their work have additional security involved in getting in there.

But I think another sort of benefit, and this is getting into sort of boring territory of dollars and cents, one of the opportunities we have in looking at our accommodation portfolio, and everyone knows that accommodation is, it's one of the biggest expenses you have after personnel, right? So we are looking at how we can organise ourselves through block and stacking exercises to create flexible spaces within existing buildings, to create, again, more flexibility again for people to work wherever is most convenient for them, while at the same time minimising our need to take out leases on an ongoing basis, which I think is a significant saving for the territory and a really positive outcome for the community.

Brock Phyland:

Now Noel, you work out of the flexible workspace in Belconnen. What are some of the benefits for you and your work and maybe even your lifestyle?

Noel Chan:

For me, I actually enjoy overall working in the activity-based work environment because in the ACT Government we have a number of different work locations are having the ABW fitout. So my permanent locations, work locations is in the city. That is the 20 London Circuit is an awesome building and beautiful fitout. And that way that is I will meet my teammates, we'll have face-to-face catch up and bigger group meetings and have innovations of getting to solve some problems face-to-face together.

And then other day by myself, I usually will book a Belconnen flexi space that is close to my home because I live near Belconnen and then that save me the travel time and give me more flexibility to deal with my family responsibility to pick up kids for medical appointments, teachers interviews and so forth. That is, I really enjoy it. And another aspect is I will meet a lot of other colleagues that previous were in another area, so I will just bump them and say hi over there. That is really awesome experience and it is a beautiful looking through the whole beautiful Ginninderra Lake. So that is another thing and a very nice environment and is provided. I just enjoy the work provision of the fitout and the environment that helped me to meet other people around the ACT Government. Yeah.

Brock Phyland:

That sounds fantastic, Noel, to be able to balance your work, your lifestyle, everything all within that space there. I guess I've heard it described as a neighbourhood environment. Matt, can you tell us a little bit more about this neighbourhood environment?

Matt Padovan:

Sure. So this goes back to some of the design principles we have in place for our buildings when we put them in place. So a neighbourhood is a area within a building that is dedicated to a particular team. So this provides comfort. This is something that we implemented during the early days of our pilot programme. Originally we were free for all, so people could basically set up whatever desk they liked. What we found though is that staff weren't necessarily always happy about the idea that they couldn't find a desk near their colleagues. So we implemented a neighbourhood model, which created a bit more structure around that idea. So they still had plenty of freedom to move within the environment and select any workstation that would best suit the activities they needed to do, but they had that comfort that within that neighbourhood they would find their colleagues. So that's something we've taken forward.

We also have flexi spaces, which is what Noel was describing when she was talking about working from Belconnen. Now, what our project has looked at post-COVID is around the idea that the way that we use our office space has very much changed. What we found is that when we established our two large buildings in Civic and Dickson, which are kind of our flagship locations, they were built to function a specific way, and that was around the idea of having eight desks per 10 staff, but having those buildings operating at more or less capacity every day.

Now, COVID changed that. As soon as that happened, we had to contend with social distancing and the like, which reduced our overall capacity of buildings down to about 50% because every other workstation had to be taken offline. Now, we've climbed back up to having all our desks available in those locations, but the challenge now is that, well, not a challenge. I think it's an opportunity that our staff have an opportunity to work flexibly. They're usually working two or three days in the office, the remainder being working from home or from one of our flexi spaces.

So the opportunity is how can we best make best use of our accommodation portfolio? And that's where we've been looking at vacant or underused offices in each of Canberra's regions and how we can convert those into fully functional office spaces that anyone can use.

So we've had instances of not just office-based staff, but frontline workers such as teachers and doctors using these spaces to support flexible working. So it might be that a teacher during school holidays needs to work on some paperwork or some administrative functions. They're able to use these spaces closer to home rather than travelling all the way across town to their primary location. And that takes us back to the principle of giving our staff back time. So they're still delivering the same kind of outputs and outcomes we would expect of them, but we are giving them back time in forms of greater flexibility in terms of how they choose to do their work and where they choose to do their work. So they're not having to commute 30 minutes each way. They might be able to walk from their home to a nearby office.

Brock Phyland:

Fantastic. It just obviously sounds fantastic in terms of just the flexibility and I guess more the accessibility of utilising these locations and it's brilliant to hear I guess how COVID obviously came to it with a challenge and I like how you flipped the script there and sort of said, "But here's the opportunity for us as well." So that's fantastic.

So Noel, you've sort of mentioned being able to connect with colleagues that you don't normally work with, maybe seeing some colleagues you used to work with. Can you tell us about a time when having that close connection in a flexi workspace with someone from a different area has helped you maybe innovate or overcome a particular challenge?

Noel Chan:

For example, I meet colleagues from Transport Canberra. They may work through some traffic light system. And other role in the same time, I used to work in the ICT system, so that is just have the conversations that inspire me, that is something I need to consider and do the work differently. Another project currently working on a utility infrastructure-related project. I just happened to meet someone sit next to me from Access Canberra on utility regulations. So that conversation also inspired me to think about what else I need to consider in my project and who I need to talk to across the other agencies or departments.

So I think that is the collaboration that normally I won't be able to pick up a phone. That online environment is convenient, but face-to-face, that conversation is just to the next level. And another thing I think encourage really good to do is sometimes I will meet my colleagues who live close to the area like Belconnen or Gungahlin, I can just meet them face-to-face over there, have that one-to-one catch up to build a rapport. Yeah.

Brock Phyland:

I love it. I love that accidental collaboration that just seems to happen within the hallway. You only get that by that face-to-face connection I've found as well. So it's brilliant to hear. And I guess it's probably clear, Matt, that Noel and speaking probably on behalf of a lot of people that utilise these flexible workspaces, enjoy it and enjoy that space. So for you, what's been the best moment working on this project?

Matt Padovan:

Oh, gosh. I've been working in this project since again 2016, and I think the things that I found most rewarding have been seeing the result of my efforts in transforming the way that the public sector has worked. Like what Noel's described there in terms of the collision ideas, the kind of things that wouldn't happen in a traditional office environment. That is very much a deliberate intent of what we've been doing. And I think that you don't get too many opportunities to really shape the way the organisation works much in your career. So I've been very grateful for that and I think I'm really excited to see what direction things go towards the future.

Brock Phyland:

It's such a fantastic initiative. Noel, I don't want to put you on the spot here, but if you had to sell working in the flexible workspace in Belconnen to a colleague, what would you say? How would you sell it?

Noel Chan:

It's a beautiful I think out of all because other flexi space is coming online soon, but at this stage, I think Belconnen flexi space is one of the most beautiful office. You can see the overall lake view and then the internal fitout is very awesome as well. They have that kind of... This gives you a lot of rooms to do individually if you want to have a quiet space to work on your stuff or you want to collaborate with your colleagues or just incidental to meet someone else. And the convenient of parking and cheaper parking fee, that is another. And next to the Belconnen Westfield shopping mall, you can go shopping during lunchtime. Yeah, I think that is a lot of advantage to work in the flexi space and there is another thing I think I want to stay longer in the ACT Government.

Matt Padovan:

It is a very spectacular location. One of the things that I really like about it is that the architects work with a local Ngunnawal artist by the name of Richie Allan. So he created some artworks for this programme and they have been incorporated into the design. So there's basically murals in the form of stickers that wrap all the way through the internal part of the building. And it's just stunning. You've got the lake views and you've got this artwork sort of connecting, providing connective tissue all the way through. It's great.

Brock Phyland:

Oh, fantastic. I'm hearing the beautiful interior, the beautiful exterior, but you're too honest. You'd also sold me on the cheap parking and the shopping as well, so that's fantastic. I'm going to obviously have to make my way out to Belconnen and see this workspace, especially hearing the Indigenous murals that are being utilised. That sounds just brilliant. Matt, what tips do you have for any other jurisdictions that might be thinking of creating a similarly flexible workspace?

Matt Padovan:

Sure. So I think we've tried to position ourselves as being the most progressive jurisdiction with regards to flexible working. That means we've been taking risks in terms of the way we've approached this, and I think that is something that organisations need to have an appetite for.

I think one of the key learnings that I have is that you can't do this without having really strong leadership at the senior executive level. So having a real strong executive support function, executive sponsor for this programme is vital. But that needs to continue all the way through to the middle management levels because this really is all about the human element of the change. And if you don't invest in that, if you don't invest in the kind of training and tools that people need to work in this way, things can fall apart very quickly.

I think too that anyone going down this path needs to be bold. There's a temptation to just dip your toes in, run a very small scale pilot across 10 or 15 people, and what you can find is that you don't have enough data to take things forward. I think what I would recommend for any organisation going down this path is just to be big, to scale it out broadly and run that large-scale pilot before making really detailed decisions on what to do next. But you've got to give it some room to grow and work.

Brock Phyland:

Fantastic. Look, strong leadership at the exec level. I think the messaging of just being bold though, that's a... So many things that we do within the public service, and I think having the courage to be bold with certain projects like this has just absolutely led the way. Look, it's a big thank you. Thank you so much, Noel. Thank you, Matt. It's been an honour listening to your stories and understanding more about the difference you're making for people in the public sector. So thank you so much for coming on today.

Matt Padovan:

You're very welcome.

Noel Chan:

Thank you.

Matt Padovan:

Thanks so much. Enjoyed it.

Brock Phyland:

Brilliant. Thank you. Listeners, we hope you enjoyed hearing from Matt and Noel. What really stood out for me was that collaboration by being face-to-face with colleagues from different business areas, having that fantastic accessible space and being brave and embracing the risks that come with undertaking a project like this. And I think we could clearly see that the timing was perfect before COVID of embracing those risks and being bold in innovation.

IPAA ACT would also like to recognise the exceptional contribution of the late great Dr. Damian West PSM in commissioning this project and enabling the service to be flexible and responsive. Thank you, Damian.

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