



## WTM P02 Transcript

Sachin Patel: Founded in 1546, the Royal Navy is as much part of the fabric of the UK as queuing, or talking about the weather. Over that time, thousands of people have served in the Navy, and it is these individuals that have made it what it is and who have been instrumental in protecting the realm. And yet, as an outsider, it's also convenient to think of the Navy as a homogeneous body and to ignore the multitudes contained within. In early 2020, some higher ups in the Navy also faced up to that reality. Some forward thinking people twigged that there was an opportunity to do something with the wealth of data the Navy holds on its sailors, to give that data to the sailors themselves. That kernel of an idea led to an app which has quickly become part of sailors' lives, giving them the opportunity to take ownership of their careers and in doing so, help the Navy as it faces up to changing threats around the world.

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Hello, and welcome to Work That Matters. A podcast where we talk to some of the people involved in initiatives that have transformed organisations and people's lives. We'll hear what drove them to embrace change, their experiences of working on these projects, and what they've taken away from them. My name is Sachin Patel, and in this episode, I'll be talking to one of those forward thinking people in the Royal Navy. Captain Christopher Skidmore was part of the team that developed the initial concept for the MyNavy app, and led it through to an operational service that is used on four of the five continents and by 95% of the 35,000 strong senior service. Chris, would you like to introduce yourself and explain what it is you do and who you are?

Cpt. Chris Skidmore: Hi, my name is Chris Skidmore. I was the product owner for MyNavy, and I also run a number of data projects within the Navy, which are focused

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on people data, on exploiting that data for the way that we manage sailors' lives. It's really important to us organisationally to do this because we only - we bottom recruit people. So you joined the Navy when you leave school or when you're left university, or maybe a little bit later in your 20s and then you have a career which takes you onwards and upwards to becoming First Sea Lord eventually, if that's your aim. But we we don't tend to take people in on a sideways basis later on in life. And for that reason, keeping people and maximizing the investment that we make in their training is super important.

Sachin Patel: And so we're all very familiar with the Royal Navy as a great institution, but we're unlikely to think of it as an app developer. So how did you first become involved in this project?

Cpt. Chris Skidmore: It was really one of those things that when you're sat around the coffee boat, there's two or three of you and you're sat there

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and you're sort of just shooting the breeze about something, you think "Wouldn't it be a good idea if...?" and we'd reached a stage, we'd created a people data warehouse, which had all the sailors' data in it. One of the problems with - or one of the challenges with the HR system, is it's not the easiest thing to navigate. It really frustrates people. And we thought, wouldn't it be great if we gave you back your data in a way that you understand it? If we give you back the data that we've got on you, firstly, you can see what we've got, which is good from an insurance perspective. Secondly, you can

tell us if it's wrong, so it cleans the data up and it works better. But more particularly with this, is that we were particularly interested in what we call retention - if we can't keep people in, we can't grow them through the ranks.

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And there are three times a year when sailors decide to leave, which we knew from our data was when they're on their summer holidays, Christmas holidays or Easter holidays, those are the three main times of the year. So the simple thing was let's give them their data so that when they're sat on the sofa with their family, they have an informed conversation. They can see how much they earn. They can see how they scored at the promotion board. They can see whether they're in date for their tests, you know, like fitness, security and whatever. They can see the jobs that are open to them in their current rank. And if they can see where they scored on the promotion board and they're in the top quartile or whatever, they can then look at what the jobs are available in their next rank. So what they can then do is have a much better informed conversation, and it was simply that. So we've got all this data, we've got it in this thing. Can we get it in their hands on a mobile device?

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That was purely where it came from, simple as that.

Sachin Patel: And is that similar to how the Navy typically approaches technology projects?

Cpt. Chris Skidmore: We ran this entirely using agile, agile methodology. It wasn't really even a thing in navy command at the time. It's a bit more of a thing now, but it was the only way we were going to do it. We also did it with very small teams of people. The point was with this was that we ran on what I call Mission Command, which is you, you know, you delegate, you trust people to do what they're going to say they're going to do and then you really go on that and it's, you know, people will say, well, we all do that, but it only works if you can find people who will accept the mission. You know, fortuitously, with this, we did. You know, you've got people who were not driven by career aims. They're not driven by money aims. They're driven by the fact that they really believe it's a really great project. They have ownership of it,

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which is unusual for someone of their rank or whatever to have, and they want to complete it and do it well.

Sachin Patel: And I imagine that's quite difficult, or different rather, from people's perceptions of, you know, large investment programs and projects in the armed forces where people think of large procurement timelines and, you know, massive project life cycles. You mentioned that you ran it on agile principles. And one of those tends to be getting a really deep understanding of your of your user base. What did you do to, as part of this project, get that deeper understanding of personnel in the Navy?

Cpt. Chris Skidmore: It's fundamental in terms of ensuring that what we've delivered through MyNavy has been user centric, user centric, user facing all those terms in every way. But more broadly, the evidence base, has been far, far more useful than for just MyNavy. I'm involved in running the

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transformation program, which spans across the whole of the people and training area of the Navy, and that research, that fundamental research on attitudes, outlook, pain points user stories, personas, All of that has been absolutely spot on and when we've gone back and refreshed it, it's stood the test of time.

Sachin Patel: And was there anything in the user science or the behavioural science that made you think about how sailors are actually approaching their careers?

Cpt. Chris Skidmore: Yeah, I think one of the, I think one of the most interesting things was how long before they leave they think about it. A lot of us had assumed that it's a fairly instinctive decision because it's generally a 12 month notice period. It can be varied, but it's generally a 12 month period.

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What the evidence from this research showed, was that people were starting to make that decision three to three and a half years before they leave. And when you look at the fact that around about 40% of people leave within four or five years, a really significant number of those people have made the decision to leave before they've even been to sea. What surprised us was that it seemed to be a very conscious decision early on.

I think if you look at it through a human lens and you think of people, you know, if they're 18, 19, 20, those sorts of ages, a lot of those people are doing in the Navy, what others are doing in university. So it's hardly surprising that you, you know, that you enter into employment, you enter into, you know, a uniformed and disciplined hierarchical environment. But you're also growing up. So maybe your views do change.

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But it was that deliberateness beforehand and the same later on that was interesting.

Sachin Patel: What else did the research revealed that that surprised you, perhaps?

Cpt. Chris Skidmore: I think I think what surprised us was that it reiterated a lot of what we knew and which sometimes we pushed to one side as being a little bit too difficult. You know, it's a bit like a sort of, you say something and they say, yeah, yeah, don't worry about it. In actual fact, you know, those sorts of things we need to address. And a lot of those issues were, you know, much more broad than HR admin, they were around patterns of life, around ability to take leave when you can plan on taking leave. If you go away for nine months, which is not uncommon. If you go away for nine months in August, is you probably miss the tail end of those school holidays, if you've got children,

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you'll be away for Christmas. You'll be away for Easter and you've missed a whole school year by the time you get back. So, you know, it's been like that for a while. But sometimes you just take those stories for granted and you just need to refresh on them and then say, well, actually, you know, what can we do to make it better? And you know, the transformation program we're running at the moment addresses a lot of those sorts of issues.

Sachin Patel: Some striking findings. And so taking into account all of this, you know, research that you got from from these surveys and the like, how did this help you think or rethink how you would actually approach the MyNavy app?

Cpt. Chris Skidmore: What we became is much more ordered. And, you know, we took that user experience, those various aspects, that became the driver. So we worked our way through it on that basis. I think there were two things that flowed from this.

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The first one is the sort of digital element, the techie bit of it. The second area is that we've learned that all of this is about enablement. If your processes are rubbish and complicated, this isn't going to fix it. You've got to sort out the processes first, you've got to do that process re-engineering over whatever it is that you're gonna digitalize. Now, you would say that that's common sense. But

that is a really big learning thing for the organisation. You know, most of them think, well I can just whack that on an app. But actually, you need to sort the processes out first. And I think that's been a really big learning point for us as well.

Sachin Patel: I know earlier, you know, you mentioned that this is not how the Navy typically does projects like this. What's it done for the feeling and the sentiment around the Navy?

Cpt. Chris Skidmore: When I think back to when we first ran it out and you know, we got past a thousand users and a thousand hits and

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we thought we were doing fabulously... and you know, the point you made at the beginning that it's been accessed over four continents. As soon as we get someone in Antarctica, we'll get somebody on there. It's common across all ranks in the service. It's become just a thing of everyday life. You know, that sort of speed of adoption and incorporation into a way of working, you know, all that's doing is just mirroring what else you see elsewhere in the world, isn't it? So perhaps we shouldn't be that surprised.

Sachin Patel: No, I think you have every reason to be proud of what you've done. If I could just go back to one of the things you mentioned, which is that, at the end of it all, this is really about being better able to deploy your people and other resources in a landscape of, you know, unprecedented threats. How do you see that

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in terms of the impact of the app on communication between sailors and the administration or senior ranks?

Cpt. Chris Skidmore: It has been very interesting. I mean, one of the things we've experimented with it is how you communicate with people. So that's corporately communicate with people. So quite often it's done on a - I won't say a broadside, but you know what I mean, it's sort of like a general message and then it filters down through the business, what you would call business units, or what I would call, you know, units through the chain of command and so on. We practice much more segmenting our communications. You know, we may segment them by, you know, all the people in the submarine service as opposed to surface ships, everybody in the engineering branch as opposed to in logistics or warfare. Maybe even people in a particular rank in a particular branch or trade.

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And that that becomes really powerful because it personalizes it to people. The other thing is it allows us to unleash people's capability and views. So we had a job in the Falkland Islands, where it was impossible. We were finding it really difficult to find volunteers to go down and do it. And our preference is to use volunteers. So we did an advert on MyNavy tailored to the appropriate trade and rank volunteers. People who are prepared to go almost like the following day, it wasn't quite that desperate, but it was that sort of thing. So it works like that, now advertising jobs on there, offering people opportunities like education or learning opportunities. All that sort of stuff has suddenly blossomed, and that's spreading it to far more people, far more often than it would have happened before. It allows them to sit with their mates and talk about it in the pub or all that sort of stuff.

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Sachin Patel: I think there are some really powerful lessons in what you're saying for many other organizations. I suppose on a personal level, what do you take from this experience?

Cpt. Chris Skidmore: Actually just trust yourself at times. You know, it's a challenge. You can only give it your best shot. If it doesn't

work, it doesn't work, but you have to be prepared to accept that. There will be somebody who's got a really great idea and they'll invest in it and it won't come off and it will fail. It's how do you invest in them the second time around? Because their second idea will probably be the winner. I think that principle is really important for any organisation. The thing that you take away from that is, how do you take something like MyNavy from innovation to mainstream, but don't kill it when you make it mainstream? Because you could suffocate it. You could remove all the agility,

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the excitement, the speed, the velocity, the veracity of it, by making it mainstream. And I think, you know, I think that's a challenge in the mod, but it's equally a challenge across anywhere, really.

Sachin Patel: What a mindset and an attitude to take. Chris, thank you.

Cpt. Chris Skidmore: Thank you.

It's been fascinating to learn about the cultural complexities in the Navy and how the work you're doing could help to change that. And thank you for joining us to hear another episode of Work That Matters. We'll be back next time with another story about embracing change. If you enjoyed this podcast, please share it with your friends, family and coworkers. Again, thank you.

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