

EP04: TRANSFORMING EXPERIENCES

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

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Sachin Patel: The Department for Work and Pensions provides vital services for millions of people across the UK, often at tough moments in their lives. As the country digitizes, it has been essential for the department to keep pace. The evolution of DWP suite of digital services has been rapid and has given people better access to the support they need, but different teams innovate differently. And as a result, customers and DWP staff have sometimes been faced with a disconnected set of systems rather than a seamless end- to- end experience built around their specific needs.

In 2020, a new team, the Shared Channels Experience Directorate was established to change this, creating this team meant building a new organization from scratch while at the same time, continuing to innovate and respond to unexpected demands. My name is Sachin Patel and in this episode of the Work That Matters podcast, I'll be talking to Cheryl Stevens, the person who took on this challenge. Cheryl has more than 20 years experience of designing government services around user needs. And she received an MBE for her work in 2009. Cheryl has seen it all, but what does it take to create a new capability from scratch? How did Cheryl balance people's immediate needs against defining and executing the long- term vision, and what lessons will she be taking forward into the future? Cheryl, welcome

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Cheryl Stevens: Thank you, Sachin. I'm glad you mentioned my career in the civil service. I am a proud civil servant and have about 22 years

under my belt with lots of different roles, particularly in leadership, but the common thing that has tied all of those roles together is the desire to make things better for customers and colleagues.

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Sachin Patel: So, Cheryl, Shared Channels Experience, when I hear that, it sounds like tech jargon gone wild. Why is getting a consistent experience for digital services so important to the work that DWP does?

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Cheryl Stevens: I love that tech jargon gone wild. I'm definitely going to use that again. So you mentioned some of this but it's really important to say that DWP serves 20 million customers with access to in- and- out of work benefits, pensions, disability benefits, and child maintenance. So a really huge range of customers, some of whom are extremely vulnerable and none of whom come to DWP for fun. We are the only choice for that kind of help for customers. And often our customers are in a highly stressful situation at the time when they come to us or an emotional time for them. So our services have to be as accessible as possible. Genuinely, there aren't any edge cases for DWP.

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Sachin Patel: And prior to the creation of this new team, what would you say customers' experiences were of digital channels in particular?



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Cheryl Stevens: For customers that were claiming one benefit, I think, our digital services are world-class. I would say that being part of the digital team, the issue came for customers who were trying to navigate different digital services for different benefits. And the way that I've described it many times outside of digital, it's the difference between buying something off Argos and buying something off Amazon. You're doing the same thing but the interface is so different that you have to think. So the burden was on the customer to really think about what they were doing rather than it being intuitive and a common experience for those customers.

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Sachin Patel: What were other sorts of challenges that you were hoping to address and how did you plan to do that?

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Cheryl Stevens: Firstly, and really importantly, all of our channels are relevant to us in DWP but they do need modernizing. And that was a real recognition to start. So I inherited a great team that were already on with bringing those services, particularly telephony up to date. The main challenge that we have is agent time taken with those really simple phone calls that could be better served through a different channel. Self-serve may be one of them, but equally, we just want that better experience for those customers. The third of our customers claim more than one benefit and sometimes that's up to three or four and therefore they were using multiple services that weren't consistent. So we were inadvertently placing that burden that I talked about.

Equally, we hear a lot from our agent colleagues that they just want to do more to help customers, especially those multiple benefit customers but the systems just didn't allow that read-across, so it was really frustrating for them too. So, the common theme for those customer-facing colleagues and my own digital colleagues is that we just wanted to join it up and literally

hide that wiring from the customers but we didn't have that oversight that SCE now provides.

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Sachin Patel: So, Cheryl, I understand that day one for your new team was the 1st of April 2020 and astute listeners will probably realize that coincided with a fairly major world event. How did the pandemic shape your initial plans in terms of getting this team off the ground?

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Cheryl Stevens: Leading up to taking up post as Director of Shared Channels Experience, I had all of these best-laid plans for what the priorities would be. And they were really focusing around setting us up, great culture, somewhere for people to thrive, bringing those channels and identity teams together, setting that vision and mission. So pretty standard stuff really. However, 1st of April 2020, completely and utterly, whilst those priorities still existed for me, they were completely usurped by the real near-term priorities. The swaths of people who lost their jobs overnight... Universal Credit gained 2 million customers over those first few months. It was high peak, high-volume transactions coming in. Equally, we also had 500 colleagues who were trying to find their way through this new way of working. So alongside the kind of near-term delivery priorities, there was the real near-term wellbeing priorities for the team. And some of those were physical things like how do I get a desk, a chair, and monitor, and others were more serious in terms of "I live on my own, I'm quite isolated now, I don't go to work." So a huge range of challenges, I guess, in those first things. And I never expected to ever be trying to set up a brand new director at home in the corner of my bedroom in my slippers. It just never even entered my head that would be something that I would ever have to do. So for me, that was a real leadership challenge there as well.

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Sachin Patel: How did you balance those longer-



term aims that you had set out to achieve with those near-term emergency priorities?

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Cheryl Stevens: The main priority for me was always going to be the culture that we built in Shared Channels Experience. And the reason for that is brand new director at no baggage. So we could be a different kind of directorate. So that priority still remained. And actually, the way we led out through the pandemic, the feedback we've had from our teams, for myself and the senior leadership team, have been amazing really. The feedback we've had is that we did manage to create that culture. We did create that safe environment at that time. We delivered a lot in the last two years. So really striking the balance between that wellbeing, the future vision and mission, and making that really clear for what Shared Channels Experience was all about, and then really helping people work in the next hour if that's where the head was, or really look into that next "where will I be in a year?"

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Sachin Patel: And Cheryl, some of the things that you are mentioning that you delivered, the helplines, and also some of the changes for your agents, do you think that you probably accelerated changes that would've been necessary anyway?

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Cheryl Stevens: Oh, 100%. Absolutely. There was a real balance of what are the things that we can stop doing then. We were working at home, we were in a different space, we couldn't do everything. So there were real calls on prioritization, not just in Shared Channels Experience, but across digital as a whole. So, bringing those things forward, what we also noticed was the mix of our customers changed. So the demographics changed overnight as well. So, we got a lot of self-employed people, for example, claiming Universal Credit. And because they already had experience of dealing with online services like HMRC, actually the digital propensity started to rise as well. So

some of the things that we were a bit nervous about doing because we didn't think that the demographic would necessarily embrace certain things actually changed overnight for us too. So that did accelerate through some of those more difficult things.

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Sachin Patel: I wanted to pick up on. One of the things you mentioned which was around digital identity is that something that maybe you've been able to accelerate and do you feel that's something you really do want to prioritize?

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Cheryl Stevens: Yeah, absolutely. And particularly for those self-employed customers that I talked about before, they had already had their identity checked by HMRC, another government department. So, therefore, the trust from DWP to HMRC to say we know you've done that, so we're just going to ask a few more questions just to match them to our systems, some counter fraud checks, make it as easy as possible for those customers. That's been groundbreaking. And it's actually what the one login for government new service is based on; a real-life use case from DWP and HMRC working together to make something that actually works for customers. It's brilliant.

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Sachin Patel: Cheryl, you mentioned before that the people aspect of setting up this new team was always really important to you. Could you elaborate on how you went about creating a new culture? And I think you alluded to there being no baggage, for example?

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Cheryl Stevens: We listened and we really listened to understand and not to respond. And what I mean by that is really understanding what was important to the teams. So for some, it was real anxiety over children coming in when they were on video calls, for example, or as I said before, having the right chair, desk, monitor, whatever that might be, all valid, but they all



needed a different response. So that early time was really about listening to say what is it that you're really anxious about and then responding to that in a really human way. So that's the core thing that I am the proudest of in the last two years. I'm so proud of the delivery and the difference we've made to the customers, but I'm really proud of the way we led out in a human way in Shared Channels Experience.

So to give you some examples, I often had my nine-year-old... Sonny was then 11 now, sat next to me doing his schoolwork whilst I was on video calls. And when he interrupted me, I tried not to apologize. I was in his home-working and I made that very clear early on on an all-colleague call that we were not working from home. We were at home working in a global pandemic and there was a really big difference. So we did, of course, make sure people had the kit they needed. Brilliant colleague Kenny and his team did a great job of making sure that we were all okay. But building that culture started with that listening to understand. And it's still something that we talk about now in Shared Channels, listen to understand, not to respond; formulate your response then respond.

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Sachin Patel: And what have you seen in terms of the impact of taking that very human-centered and listening first approach?

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Cheryl Stevens: (inaudible) bragging rights now, Sachin, for two years running, we have had the highest engagement score in our people survey across digital. One of the highest in DWP, all centered around leadership culture, knowing where they fit in the organization, what the vision is for the team, the visibility of leadership, we make an absolute effort, particularly in the pandemic because there was no other way of constantly all-colleague calls, blogging, whatever we could do to help people understand what was happening. Again, it was a brand new directorate, so really trying to establish ourselves whilst we were all working remotely. The only way we could do it was to, what we would've

termed pre-pandemic was, "overcommunicate." So, I think we did that and I would never use the "overcommunicate" again because I think we've learned over the last two years that you just can't communicate enough, particularly when there is a mix of people who are feeling very different things.

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Sachin Patel: You alluded to the passing of time in the context of your son's age, we're now coming up to almost two years since the directorate was established. In terms of the big picture, what impact have you seen in those two years?

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Cheryl Stevens: So it's been amazing really. Through our automated telephony identity and robotics, over two and a half million of our customers have been able to retrieve their next payment date and rate for employment support, allowance, and personal independent payment. So previously, they would've called, hung on the phone to speak to an agent to get reassurance about when they were going to be paid and how much it was. They can self-serve now as often as they like to get that reassurance. If they want to speak to an agent, they absolutely can. But if that's all the information they want, they can do it whenever they like. And we have deployed video as a new channel, and that has had a big impact for our health customers. So around half of our health customers now choose to do their health assessments through video rather than face-to-face because it's more convenient for them.

They can do it from the comfort of their own home. We've done so much, but probably the one that's had the impact that I wasn't expecting it to have was web chat. So we deployed web chat into our child maintenance group. So child maintenances were separated. Parents need help agreeing on the maintenance arrangements for the children. We put web chat in there. And the feedback we got back from our customers was around the difference that it made because the children couldn't hear the conversation. So if the absent parent hadn't paid the maintenance



on time, rather than the child having to hear that through a phone call to the agent, it was a silent typing. So a really big impact for the customers through something quite simple actually. So that for me stands out. It's one of the go- to big impacts for me.

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Sachin Patel: You've had this incredible progress. What comes next for you and the team?

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Cheryl Stevens: We continue to grow as a directorate. We're now returning to the workplace in a hybrid way as are so many other people. So, we're adapting to a different way of working once more, but we are an established team now. And our portfolio for the next three years is really truly exciting. It's transformational. It will transform the channel offering, create that common customer experience that we're striving for. So in terms of a few specifics around what's to come for us, we're about to deploy voice steering for calls. So at the moment, it is the IVR press button X for this, press button Y for that. Some of our IVR messages are minutes- long. Customers get fed up and just press a button to get to an agent. We've all done it. And you absolutely understand the frustration, so voice steering is really important to us.

Voiceprint for authentication, for returning customers. So, we get a lot of calls, around 70 million a year, and most of those are returning customers who currently have an identity check every time they call. So that voiceprint to enable authentication with consent, of course, is really important. Again, more advances in the online identity services as well as those common customer experience initiatives like voice of the customer, so getting real- time feedback from customers that we can act on and that joining up of the data for customer and colleagues to help them solve that multi- benefit disconnect that we see today. I honestly believe I've got the best job. I know DWP Digital is going to make a big difference to service modernization. I think it's

really, truly exciting to be where we are now having learned what we've learned over the last two years particularly.

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Sachin Patel: And what's the biggest lesson that you've learned over those two years of running this team?

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Cheryl Stevens: Take care of your people and your people will take care of delivery.

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Sachin Patel: A huge task in terms of scale executed with a real focus on the humans at the heart of it. Cheryl, thank you.

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Cheryl Stevens: Thank you.

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Sachin Patel: And thank you for joining us for this episode of Work That Matters. We'll be back next time with another story about embracing change for the good of society. And if you enjoyed this podcast, please share it with your friends, family, and coworkers. Again, thank you.