



WALK IN THE CLOUD

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

Host:

Ellen Bencard, Accenture, UKI Local
Eminence Lead, Walk in the Cloud Host
Speaker:

Mark Byrne, Accenture
Brian Hills, The Data Lab

Mark Byrne Bio:

Mark is a Managing Director in Accenture's Data & AI practice having 20 years of experience in the field working in both consulting and industry. Mark leads Accenture's Data & AI business in Scotland and works with some of the biggest media and financial services companies in the UK, helping them embed strong data foundations, pivot their cultures to be data-driven, recognise and prepare for the potential of artificial intelligence, and ultimately to accelerate the benefits they realise from their data. Mark lives in Edinburgh with his wife, two children and their dog, Freddie.

Brian Hills Bio:

Brian is Chief Executive of The Data Lab, Scotland's Innovation Centre for Data and Artificial Intelligence. He is responsible for strategy, culture and delivery, joining as a founding member of the team in 2015 as Head of Product Management. Brian was recognised as one of the most influential people in data as a top 5 data influencer in the

dataIQ 2023 UK top 100 and he is also nominated for the UKTech50 2023. Prior to The Data Lab, Brian held senior roles at Skyscanner, Sumerian and HP."

Intro: Walk in the Cloud.

Ellen: Hello all, we have travelled North for today's walk. The Royal Mile, a skirl of bagpipes, the One O'Clock Gun, and there's even a bit of sunshine on Leith. Yes, we are in Edinburgh! But tell me, when you think of the Scottish capital, do you think data along with all those other things? Because that's what the government up here and my guests today, would like to add to your list. I'm your host Ellen Bencard. Welcome to our latest Walk in the Cloud.

This conversation was triggered by a new report from [Accenture, called Edinburgh's Path to Data Excellence](#). I'm joined here today by its author Mark Byrne and by Brian Hills of the Edinburgh-based, [Data Lab](#). Now Brian, you are the CEO of the Data Lab which is part of the University of Edinburgh. Can you start us off with some context? What are Edinburgh's aspirations when it comes to Data and AI and how are you involved in that?

Brian: Hi Ellen, great to be here. Within the University there's a program called the [Data-Driven Innovation \(DDI\) Programme](#) and that's a 15-year,



£661 million investment. That is going to look at how Edinburgh city region develops itself as a global location that power services with data Science and AI. Primarily to attract global talent and global investment into Edinburgh, driving both UK growth and social prosperity. There have been six Institutes that have been created to drive that. [The Bayes Centre](#) - which the Data Lab are hosted in focusing on data and AI. [The Edinburgh Futures Institute](#), the [Easter Bush Agritech Hub](#), the [Usher Institute](#), the [Edinburgh International Data Facility \(EIDF\)](#) which gives the super compute to power all the data and AI processing. Finally, last but not least, [The National Robotarium](#) at Heriot-Watt University. They are really driving forward what will happen in the region. In terms of Data Lab and the context within that, it is housed in Edinburgh University. I am an Edinburgh University employee, but our remit from our funders (the Scottish Funding Council) is to work across all universities and colleges in Scotland. And connect them into industry in the public sector to drive economic and social value. A quick example is that we are doing a lot of work in skills at the moment. We created the Data Skills Gateway and Data Skills for Work, looking at upskilling and reskilling people at risk of automation or in minority groups in the region. We have trained over 600 people now, and that's been a really successful model, we have now gained funding to trial that in Teesside. Our ambition would be to learn from the situation in Edinburgh and take those learnings around Scotland, to power our success across the country and nationally.

Ellen: That is a heck of a remit. You are never going to be bored. Edinburgh announced an ambition specifically to be the data capital of Europe. What does that mean?

Brian: For me it really means to be standing out across Europe as the place to come and do data, applied into making meaningful economic and social change. It's about bringing together academia, industry, and the public sector, in a way that no other country or city does. The potential to do that, as is referred in the report and from Mark and the team, is absolutely amazing.

Ellen: Mark, that's your cue, tell us about this report. You were the lead on it, and the report looks at how Edinburgh can achieve its ambitions - what did you find out?

Mark: Great to be here with you today. First and foremost, we found some fantastic progress so far. Edinburgh regularly features as one of the top cities in the world for data and AI Talent. It is punching well above its weight. Brian mentioned the Data-Driven Innovation (DDI) Programme and the 15-year plan associated with that. At the outset of that program the plan was very much to produce 100,000 data and AI specialists over that period. I think through the findings of the report we're really seeing the recognition of that investment coming through now, which is which is fantastic. The report also points out Edinburgh's differentiated financial services and digital sectors. It's the home to many innovative fintech and unicorns such as Skyscanner and Vango which is again a huge plus for the region. I think for me one of the findings for the report which is really powerful, is the clear and consistent vision for the sort of data capital the Edinburgh wants to be. I think when you look at what's happening now with Generative AI and how that's changing the industry.



How that is connecting with everyday people around what's coming. You realise that data and ethics has never been more important than it is right now. You know you see Sam Altman the CEO of OpenAI appearing in front of Congress talking about the importance of regulation. That's an area Edinburgh has been pioneering for years and we have some of the world's leading thought leaders in the region. This is again a sign of the foresight in the region in this space. If you'll indulge me a little bit on our walk as we come up to Edinburgh Castle and look South across Old Town. You'll see an old Victorian hospital that's being renovated into a state-of-the-art facility dedicating 20,000 square meters to data and AI research. That's the Edinburgh Futures Institute that Brian mentioned earlier. You know what the best thing about that facility is? It's not a building that's going to be dedicated to data scientists and to data engineers, it's a building for all sorts of disciplines. It's going to home philosophers, geography students, mathematicians, biologists. What that facility is doing is creating a multi-disciplinary environment that recognises that data is only useful when it's applied to real-world problems. In Edinburgh, what we're doing is building capability that underpins everything 'data' across multiple disciplines. Lots of fantastic progress is found in the report, but as with all these things, potentially we could do more or different things which are some of the learnings that came out.

Ellen: You know I love the continuity that you point out. People will know Edinburgh as the Athens of the North. They'll know the incredible intellectual firepower it brought to the 18th Century. There is such a long tradition of intellect up here, that it makes perfect sense that it keeps going. Mark, you mentioned there's a list of things that need to happen to get to that aspiration.

What did you find? What does Edinburgh still need to work on?

Mark: Yeah, so there is definitely opportunity for improvement and to do more. The aspiration at the outset was never to be *the* data capital of Europe, but to be a data capital for Europe. Creating an ecosystem of complementary capability across the continent that powers innovation and growth within the UK, Europe, but also globally. One of the findings was sharpening that focus, creating more clarity on what it is Edinburgh is going to differentiate on. It's fine to be a data capital for Europe but even as a data capital there should be something that you're the go-to place for. There should be at least one thing that you are number one consistently for. Whether that is data ethics, data and AI applied in financial services. One of our recommendations was thinking about clarifying and sharpening that message, so that you can really measure success and consistently excel in that differentiating capability as part of that wider ecosystem across Europe. We also looked at broader capability across Scotland. I think one of the interesting things when you think about Edinburgh is digital financial services. If you actually widen the lens not very much, you find a lot of complementary specialism and capability. Glasgow for engineering, Dundee for healthcare and gaming, Aberdeen for renewables.

Ellen: Brian, why does this matter so much to Edinburgh and Scotland?

Brian: For me Ellen, I think you over the last few years I've seen the opportunity and hope that being can be created through the use of data and AI across the economy and society. From business transformation, in particularly SMEs based in Scotland, which is quarter of



the economy. Both through creating new careers, but also by enabling people to pivot their existing careers and in their 30s, 40s and 50s. Through to the social impact of having programs like the Data for Children Club with UNICEF and many others. People write to us and say 'Thank you. You've changed my life.' What better feedback can you get than that? For me it matters deeply. When I started my career way back in Hewlett Packard I was thinking I'm willing to stay in the role for four years at a time. There is so much opportunity that I have been at the Data Lab nearly nine years, because I truly believe in what we're doing here. Not because I'm stuck, but because there's so much great opportunity. I might touch on a couple of examples from across Scotland. Last week I visited the Quarrier Centre for Epilepsy in Glasgow. We're funding a project with Glasgow Caledonian University. They are a world leading social care facility, helping people live independently and improving the diagnosis of the most complex epilepsy cases. They are now doing predictive analytics on understanding people and when they may experience episodes, and why they've experienced episodes. I met the patients there directly, they said 'this is transforming my life.' Healthcare is obviously a massive area. Then through to manufacturing, we're running the analytics piece for the UK smarter manufacturing data hub. This week I've heard one of the SMEs we work with has just saved a million and a half pounds. They were able to use data and analytics with us, to understand that the infrastructure they had, had capacity to do more productivity. They didn't need to invest another a million and a half in a machine at this stage in their journey. One that we've done with Edinburgh is a company called Trade in Space.

They were able to collaborate with Edinburgh through a project we ran to help identify coffee plantations in South America, from that project with the university they've been able to strike significant deal for them with the biggest coffee supplier in the world. There are so many examples, but that's what makes me really excited about this space and wanting to keep pushing on.

Ellen: From Edinburgh to Glasgow, to South America. This is clearly one of those ripples in a pond thing where the goodness just keeps on going. What were you thinking?

Mark: It would be easy for me to sit here and tell you that it's going to impact your business and you're going to be disrupted and so on and so forth. A lot of those things are true, but as Brian mentioned, data is a fundamental part of everything we do. It's critically important that everyone has a level of understanding around how they're data is being collected. About how it's being stored and used. And being able to leverage it for their own benefit, so that we don't leave anyone behind. This comes through loud and clear from the examples that Brian talks about. Another great example from Edinburgh, there is an organisation called the Smart Data Foundry. It is looking at how we open up financial data to serve and solve societal problems. Creating fairer economic policy or improving access to financial products for vulnerable customers. Or helping society understand data, leverage data, get the most from it and not being left behind. It does have the potential to widen the divide if we are not careful. That's why investment from the bottom up is critical. These aren't Scottish issues they are things that apply everywhere. Edinburgh is helping through organisations like Brian's to solve this.



Ellen: We are coming to the end of our walk here. If we can leave people with one thought, if you are a business leader in Edinburgh and you're involved in data. But let's think about that divide. I want to close that divide rather than widen it. What is the one thing I could do to make sure that the gap is getting smaller.

Mark: I think for me Ellen, my advice would be 'think big'. Don't be constrained. I think quite human beings we tend to immediately see hurdles and limitations. I think right now we are at a point in data AI where you don't worry about the how, we'll figure that out. There is plenty of amazing people out there who can solve these problems and technologies there with the cloud. Focus on what's really going to change your business, change your industry, change the world. I think if we think big, we'll definitely achieve that. And as Steve Job's said 'Let's go and put a ding in the Universe'.

Ellen: I like it. Brian, it's yours to wrap up.

Brian: When we did the roundtable for the discussion, we were rating how we felt about the ambition. I think I was about seven or eight. But after having that evening of discussion, I was at an eleven out of ten, because I was just so super enthused with the potential for this. If we get it right to Mark's point, and really think big. A key component is inclusion. At the Data Lab we are funded to do specific things, the questions that I have been asking myself and the team is 'we fund a certain number of students, but how do we enable any student to connect with the Data Lab and get some value directly and connect to that network?' How do we enable any SME in Scotland to understand what data can bring to them and where they can take their first steps.

So, we've launched our [Data Lab digital community](#). That's really focused on increasing inclusion across Scotland and internationally. It's really designed to help people make their first steps on a personal data journey or a company data journey. All the way through to those that are using data and AI in advanced ways. Just over a year and a half now, we've got 3,000 members from 60 countries around the world. I thought it might just be a Scottish thing, but there's so much interest and connectivity on this. I think that if we get the community piece right on this, that's really going to be the growth engine for what we do across Scotland. It's going to feed for me into Mark's piece about thinking big and globally, in Scotland's play here.

Ellen: I think there's a lot to inspire listeners here. Thanks to both of you for joining us today.

Listeners if you're interested in reading more search 'Accenture and Edinburgh Data Report' and that will come right up for you. In the meantime, if you enjoy our little walks enough to want them to pop right into your phone without any effort on your part, subscribe on your favourite podcast app to keep those episodes coming. Of course, the whole Walk in the Cloud team would love it if you would like, share, review, and do all that good stuff. It raises our profile. We love putting these episodes together for you, and the more popular they are, the more likely we are to keep doing that. That is all for now, I'll be back with another walk soon.

Outro: Walk in the Cloud.

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