
Narrator: Welcome to InTransition, a program dedicated to the practice of content marketing in government. Here's your host, David Pembroke.

David: Well, hello again ladies and gentlemen wherever you may be listening in this big wide world of ours. Welcome to this week's edition of InTransition, the podcast dedicated to the practice of content marketing in government. My name's David Pembroke and I am seriously delighted that you've joined me again today as we explore how governments are using content marketing to strengthen communities and improve the well-being of citizens. Now, our guest this week comes from an interview I recorded late last year with Russell Grossman. Now Russell was in Australia at the time in his role as the international chair of the International Association of Business Communicators. But his day job is also as Director of Group Communications in the UK government's Department of Business Innovation and Skills. Russell is also a visiting fellow at the Cass Business School and he really is a very insightful person. I really enjoyed the chat. He did speak to a breakfast and I was able to get him back to the studio between appointments for a very brief chat, not as long as normal, probably about 15 to 20 minutes, but again Russell has so much insight. And for those of you who are regular listeners, you will know that I am a bit of a fanboy of what the UK government is doing in terms of content marketing in government. They are, in my opinion, clearly leading in the practice of content marketing in government, and there is so much that we can learn from them. So I hope you do enjoy this, it's a great interview, I really enjoyed Russell, he's got lots of insight, enjoy being InTransition.

Russell, just to give us a little bit of background about yourself, and the roles that you have at the moment, many and varied, a potted history, if I could, the Russell Grossman story.

Russell: Ha ha! Well how big is the pot? No. I'm Group Director of Communications at the Department for Business Innovation and Skills at the UK government, I've been there for, coming up 7 years. The Department for Business Innovation and Skills has a very wide, we look over everything policy-wise from higher education through trade, enterprise skills, all the way to exports. So it's a very busy and very wide department. I also have 2 other briefs at the moment, one is that I'm the director of Engage For Success, which is a non-profit movement which was born out of BIS, as it happens, that is dedicated to improving employee engagement and the product of employee engagement for the UK. And I'm also the chair internationally of IABC, the International Association of Business Communicators.

David: Lots to talk about across each of those areas. But what I would like to focus our attention today is around government communications in the UK. In episode 1, we spoke with Alex Aiken and he painted a very broad picture of the change that's undergone in UK government communications over the last few years. But I'd like to go back to the beginning, really, to understand where did this change start and what brought it about?

Russell: I suppose the principal element of change for the whole program was the government's reforms to government generally. We needed to have reduced the amount of money that is spent on government communications by a significant amount. In fact, a reduction of 75% from the 2009-2010 figures to the current day.

David: Seventy five percent?

Russell: That's correct, 75%.

David: That's a vast amount of money.

Russell: Well that was the target. We have achieved the vast majority of that and we've done that through taking, in a sense, charge of our own destiny. And the genesis of the GCS has very much been in determining that clearly whilst on the one hand we needed to make the savings, we wanted to use the opportunity to really up-skill and up-professionalize the whole of the government communications approach. So what was then the government communications network, which was a loose network of professionals working in government, is now a formal service. And our basic mantra is that we want overall the service to be more skilled, more unified, and less bureaucratic.

David: So how did you go about starting to achieve some of those savings?

Russell: Well, from a leading people change. The first thing was we got all our directors of communication, of which I'm one, together, and ask: do we all sign up to this. And pretty much everybody did, difficult really not to sign up to the idea of making yourself more professional. And we have then taken a project management approach to 11 different reforms, which have ranged from, for example, increasing the single way that we do planning across government, to reigning in our regional operation, to up-skilling the way in which we do internal communications, all the way through to things like making sure that we have a rigor in measurement and evaluation of public campaign.

David: Now, does this mean that you have surrendered your autonomy to the center, to the Government Communications Service, given that you are the Director of Business and Innovation?

Russell: Well, I am a director of the Government Communications Service. So far from surrendering my autonomy, what we have done is collectively we have come together to maximize the strength that we can put into a common endeavor.

David: But where is your priority? Is it to your department first, or is it to the GCS first?

Russell: I have a dual approach. Firstly, my first policy priority, as it were, is serving the ministers and the Department for Business Innovation and Skills. But the way in which I do that professionally is guided by, is informed by, and is enhanced by the Government Communications Service. And, as I say, I am very much part of an integral element of the GCS.

David: I am intrigued by perhaps the reaction of the political leaders and the political leader's officers to the establishment of the GCS, and whether or not there was any sense of we're giving something away here, we're giving some control away?

Russell: There were some queries about that from our ministers, simply, as you say, are we giving something up? Is the center, which to be fair is always somewhere where you're not, is the center coming in. And I was able to reassure my ministers, and I think my colleague directors were also able to do the same with that. That far from giving up power, this was actually improving the degree to which we are taking forward the professionalization of communications.

David: And what about the departmental secretaries or the equivalent of departmental secretaries? What was their attitude to it?

Russell: The permanent secretaries were similarly of a mind that provided the service that they get from their communications team was at least as good as it was, they were perfectly content. And indeed, the proof has been that there has been no shift of power, as it were, from departments to the center. What we have seen however is a much greater rigor in the way that we have measured, evaluated, planned, and ultimately delivered communications.

David: What's been the single greatest success of the GCS in your view?

Russell: It's probably bringing together the 4400 people who do communications across government and its ALBs, that's arms length bodies, to create a single force. Now we're still in the process of doing that of course, but if I look at this from a person perspective, some of the programs that we put in inspire, aspire these training programs for our leading and in some cases trailing members. Those have all significantly increased the degree to which our people are professional, and the degree to which their careers have been built.

David: How have you been able to afford and fund training programs at a time you are undertaking such radical cuts into the macro levels of money investment in communications?

Russell: Well one of our mantras is that actually training is not something that we want to see cut. There is a difference of course between profligate spent on inappropriate training and training that is absolutely appropriate to make sure that we deliver the things that our ministers and our permanent secretaries want. So the training budget is adequate and sufficient for what we require. We've also been able to partner, for example, with organizations like the IABC to deliver training in a way that has not required us to begin courses from scratch.

David: So in terms of how it works, when does this GCS come together, and what's a typical sort of GCS meeting look like?

Russell: Well there isn't of course a typical meeting, and the service is, in one sense, virtual, but in another sense it's a series of events and networking that bring together professionals across the service in different disciplines. So for example, one of the particular areas I'm concentrating on is building of and upgrading internal communications and engagement across the whole of government. That has meant that in the last 6 to 9 months, we've already held 3 face-to-face conferences of internal communications practitioners across the United Kingdom, in a way that previously had never been done. And that has enabled people not just to network together, but also to understand the gaps that they have in their own knowledge and their own practice, and of course seek to fill those.

David: So internal communications is an obvious focus, what are the other areas of specialization that you're looking at?

Russell: We've been particularly attentive to things like measurement, evaluation, and planning. We look at a particular cycle for communications campaigns. We call it

the 4 Is that begin with Insight, then continue through Ideas, then Implementation, and finally Impact. It's just a mnemonic that we use, as we use quite a few in GCS, which is handy to be able to explain to the layman and also sometimes to our own people the way that we're doing these things.

David: You had a, well the government did, or the GCS perhaps, had a look at the capability across the UK government. When you went and had a good look around, what did you find?

Russell: The capability reviews that took place ... Communications operations which took place in 2012 and 2013, they found that government communications was tactically strong but strategically weak. Another way of saying this was: we were really good in getting our ministers either on the front page or keeping them off front page the following day, but we were less good, as we say in the civil service, about working out where we would like to move our audiences over the next 3 to 4 months. And so a lot of our attention has been on, for example, areas of behavioral communication and on attention to campaigns that are delivering defined objectives and defined timescales with defined benefits.

David: So in terms of your team, the hundred plus people that you have working with you, how much time do they dedicate to this sort of central role or engagement or involvement in the central role, as opposed to how much time they spend on your business?

Russell: Yeah, it doesn't actually work like that. There isn't a definition between the central role and the role that they play. And to be clear, the work of all the individual departmental teams continues to be in policies across the government. One of the advantages of GCS is that it's removed duplication by bringing together different parts of departments working in exactly the way that they would have done previously, except they're now collaborating on the 3 big campaigns we have running across government, which are around growing the economy, fairness and aspiration, and Britain in the world.

David: It seems remarkable that you have achieved such a degree of alignment, and cooperation and collaboration, I just reflect on perhaps where we sit in Australia and just think, could this be possible, is this possible to be able to do that? What do we have to do to find this momentum?

Russell: I think there are 3 key elements that have allowed us to get so far in the time that we have. The first is that we have offered the people in the GCS the

opportunity to increase their degree of professionalization, and ultimately the equity that they have in their careers. That's obviously been an attraction. The second is that there has been a burning platform from government that if we didn't sort ourselves out, then somebody would come and sort ourselves out for us. And then the third is the element of strong, bold leadership and tight project management. We have a strong, bold leader, you can afford to have one in any organization, and he has been, not singularly, but with the directors of communication, been able to create the kind of traction that I've talked about. And that's been supported by a PRINCE2 approach to project management in terms of these 11 reforms that I was talking about.

David: In terms of the actual practice of communication, what have you seen as the big changes over the last few years?

Russell: In government specifically?

David: In government specifically.

Russell: Well certainly digital media has moved a long way. And the degree to which we now use digital is hugely significant and actually it is just part of what we do. When I talk about digital, I'm talking for example about the way in which we release news, increasingly, for example, through Twitter in a 24-hour news cycle, and much less through the press releases. There is a view perhaps provocatively that the press release is dead. Well that's not quite the case, but certainly the degree that we use digital means for. In addition, for example, distributing photographs and pictures through Flickr so that journalists can access the site whenever they want to, using LinkedIn and Facebook also to help campaigns connect with those people, those citizens that most particularly are interested or need to understand what the government is doing, all the way through to using a whole suite of free channels that are available, free tools rather, that are available on the Internet, such as Evernote, or such as Basecamp, that we actively encourage practitioners in government to use for nothing, for free.

David: Within the Australian government obviously there are policy areas, and their roles are to produce policies on behalf of the government. Have you as communicator been able to create better engagement with policy areas in order to gain access and insights from citizens and stakeholders, in order to feed into the policy areas, and conversely taking insights out of policy areas that you are then able to feed back into the community?

Russell: Okay. This is a core of our role and one of the ways in which the GCS particularly wants to see practitioners move is to be working hand and glove with policy officials at quite an early stage in the policy development process. That early stage allows us, for example, to feed in insights through consultation, and it also allows us to be able to play and articulate with policy officials in a way that makes policy a more coherent, if you like, to citizens and to businesses. So that's, yes, that's very important. And the whole area of insight and the emphasis that we now put on insight makes that even more significant than previously.

David: What's next for the GCS?

Russell: Well, we have a project called GCS 2020, in which we are looking at what is next, not just for GCS, but actually for the whole communications profession. Recently we held a series of round tables with experts from the industry around topics such as digital to ask where things are going next. We believe that absolutely we need to build on the momentum that we've created. We've just begun a second phase of the reforms, having successfully completed the first phase. And that second phase is looking at tools, tips, tricks, and techniques going into 2020, and particularly ways of working, and also the ways in which government can spend less money on more impactful communications which are appropriate to the citizens and to businesses.

David: There you go, you have to hand it to them. They really have their hands wrapped around this challenge of content marketing in government. That is our friends in the UK government, and more power to them, really doing fantastic things. And I would encourage all of you to go and explore the UK government's Government Communications Services website, follow them on Twitter, and take a deep dive into a lot of what they're doing, because there is so much for us to learn there.

So thanks again, thanks for joining us In Transition, we've got lots of great programs coming up, certainly really looking forward to continuing to add some value to you, as you take on this challenge of introducing the practice of content marketing in government that will help you to help government strengthen communities and improve the well-being of citizens, wherever you may be in the world. So thanks again and I do look forward to you being with me next week. And if you do get a chance to quickly jump over to iTunes and any sort of review does help us, it helps us to be found, and therefore helps us to build this community that we are, around government content marketers around the world. So thanks again, have a great week, and look forward to speaking to you then. Thanks again, bye for now!

Narrator: You've been listening to InTransition, the program dedicated to the practice of content marketing in government. For more, visit us at www.intransitionpodcast.com.au