
InTransition episode 78 – Sean Worth

David Pembroke: Hello ladies and gentlemen, welcome once again to In Transition, the podcast that examines the practice of content marketing in government and the public sector. My name is David Pembroke and thank you very much for joining us once again. We'll come to our guest in a moment, but first as we do each week, we begin with the definition of content marketing in government and the public sector.

Content marketing is a strategic, measurable and repeatable business process that relies on the creation, curation and distribution of useful, relevant and consistent content. The purpose is to engage and inform a specific audience in order to achieve a desired citizen and/or stakeholder action.

There we go. The definition once again. Today we have a really interesting guest and in place that many of us communications people don't like to go, but we'll get to that in a moment. Our guest is Sean Worth. He's an executive director of the Synergy Group in Australia. Sean specializes in benefits-led transformation and performance improvement for government. He was previously director of advisory for Ernst & Young and has worked on government projects for clients such as The Department of Defense, The Department of Immigration and Border Protection and the U.K. Department of Works and Pensions. Sean is a master of getting the value out of change. Sean Worth, thanks very much for joining me In Transition.

Sean Worth: Thanks for having me, Dave.

David Pembroke: Sean, I've got a problem. I've got a problem. I'm on the couch now. I'm a communications guy and for so long in communications, particularly in the public sector, it's been a service delivery at the end of the line. It's our fault, communicators, we have not sold our value up the line, so that people can understand just how important it is that they get the communications right to ensure that all of the moving parts in the change program, in the transformation program, in the development of policy communication is really the oil that gets the joints moving and ensures that we get those good outcomes.

I'm still not at the table. I'm still outside, I'm still ... Can you get me a video? Can you get me a brochure? Can you get me ... I found benefits realization and I think that might be a way that might help me to get into the top table and to start having these strategic conversations. I'm outside the room and before I start directly talking about my ongoing problems, can you explain to me this process of benefits realization, but understanding that the audience ... We're not a technical audience, we're a communications audience. What is it and why is it the path to salvation?

Sean Worth: Okay. Oh, Gee. You've started out with a ... What's the meaning of life? I guess, in coming to answer that question, I'll reflect, first of all, on the world that we live in and particularly the world of government. Government is a world, traditionally, that's been very much focused on the tangible. Looking for things directly in front of them that they can invest in and prove. Why is it? I think it's often because

government itself has quite a risk-averse culture and people are at times concerned to spend money without necessarily being able to see something very tangible to prove for it. As a result over the time, we've had a great deal of bias towards spending money on things that are shiny and have flashing lights on them without necessarily thinking about the best way to get the value out of that investment.

We've all seen that the huge amounts of money, they get poured into IT within government and invariably, they disappoint. For all the money go into it, things don't quite turn out as planned. I guess sympathy to our ABS colleagues, but this is probably a good example for a lot attention and effort having gone into a significant IT enabled event being the Census. Perhaps too much attention was paid to the actual technology and not enough was paid to what actually needed to happen in order to make that technology work as intended.

David Pembroke: I'll just stop you there, because we do have a global audience for In Transition. The short hand version of that story, the ABS is the Australian Bureau of Statistics. We had the annual ... Not the annual, actually, when is it? Every 4 years the Census?

Sean Worth: Every 5 years.

David Pembroke: Every 5 years the Census comes around. Essentially, we gather up the information that we need to do all of the social planning that government needs to do. In short, it was a fiasco, the IT fell over and then everything beyond that fell over, the communication was poor and really it was a not a very successful exercise. Anyway, continue.

Sean Worth: I think it's fair to say that the value, the investment that was put into the change just wasn't realized, didn't work. It is an ongoing challenge to government with having had this bias for so long to actually start the conversation around value and start with that upfront. Benefits realization, I guess, very much is focused on making the value proposition, the start of the conversation before then leaping into the solution. Benefits realization itself is actually a combination. It's a bringing together of a number of different elements. There's definitely the technical, but equally the change side of things and communications are a critical factor.

The value for a number of the big transformations that happen within government, as well as private sector, are technology-enabled, but require heavy emphasis on change and on communications, which actually get the value out of them. Benefits realization itself is a single beacon that can be used within change to actually ensure that everyone's on the same page and shooting towards the same outcome. That in itself is a critical communications activity.

David Pembroke: If you would, can you describe for me the process of benefits realization?

Sean Worth: I can. Look, in an ideal world, it starts off with, I guess, an identified need, a need to change. Before people do start launching into a solution, I guess it's actually defining what the future world should look like. It should be bettering this more of

that, less of this other thing. The second the conversation starts to actually visualizing the future and the change between today and the future, it starts to articulate in a tangible sense what benefits you're looking for from this change.

David Pembroke: That could be in terms of behaviors that you're looking to change?

Sean Worth: Absolutely. It could be increased take up of some things. If you're looking at financial objectives, it could be reduced cost of certain things. In a public value sense, it could be a richer economy, it could be a more engaged citizenry with government. There are a number of different benefits, for example, that the change could want to engender. I guess, the idea is that ultimately it's important to have all of those benefits quite clearly articulated and frankly, have them measurable in some sense, so that you can having gone through all of the pain and effort of implementing the change get a feedback that you have actually achieved the outcome that you're looking for.

David Pembroke: Savings on cost is, obviously, a hard measure and that's something that you can from year to year you can see that, for example you may have reduced a certain amount of money, which is great and still got the outcome. For example, more engaged citizenry, harder to put a monetary value around that. How do you go about putting that in place? Again, that's often something that communications people are asked to achieve, is a greater engagement of a particular audience.

Sean Worth: Absolutely. I guess you do raise a critical point there. People typically wouldn't... when you do say the words benefit realization, immediately fall to dollars and cents or pounds and pence or whatever the currency is. Whereas particularly in the public sector, value is so much broader than dollars and cents and particularly government services themselves are often focused on the well-being of the citizen in another aspects. Ultimately, I guess, there's a basic tenant that benefits realization should use measures of some sort. Engagement, various other citizenry and engagement and some, the idea would be is that that really we should be endeavoring to have some sort of measure of them in some sense. I guess, proxy measures or similar views.

David Pembroke: Okay. Would that be from, say, omnibus survey of some sort that looks to establish a benchmark around a reputation or an attitude or a view or something and then, obviously, you implement the program and then go back and measure again?

Sean Worth: Yep. Generally speaking, it would be that type of approach. It could well be that information sources might already be in place in some way. In an ideal world, rather than having to go to the effort of doing your own, if there are other measures available, definitely use that. To be honest, if you're going to go to the pain of making this change and going through such a communication approach and so on, it seems to me a pretty small investment upfront to actually get a baseline. I guess, to come back to your earlier point, often that investment actually then provides evidence of the value that has been provided. Again, you don't have to boil the ocean in order to get a sensible baseline or an indication as to what things

are like today.

David Pembroke: Yeah, it doesn't have to be absolutely microscopic in terms of being able to look to it, it just needs to be a measure of sorts that all parties are prepared to accept that that's a reasonable measure.

Sean Worth: Yeah, exactly. Then ideally, as you said, the idea would be to measure it post-implementation. It could be that, because over a period of time, depending on the change or what have you that's been implemented, there might be a series of pulses that you do take into the future to, I guess, demonstrate that the change is stuck or that the values have been sustained.

David Pembroke: Okay. Now in terms of benefits mapping, what exactly is that? Is this the process of just going through and describing what the benefits are of an articulating? What the benefits are of a particular change program?

Sean Worth: Yeah. Correct. Depending on which stage of the program we're in, it's not unusual for programs to be approved and funded on the basis of a business case that has benefits described in very rough terms. In those circumstances, we're then brought in to, I guess, validate those initial benefits. In that circumstance, the actually projects or programs themselves, the deliverables of what we find or we define, I should say. What we'll actually do is to identify specifically which change activities are occurring? Which technical deliveries are coming down the line? Then validate that those come together to produce the outcomes that are being sought.

Of course, if we're approaching a program at the inception stage, in the very initial design stage, we'll actually flip that process around, so we'll articulate the benefits that we want to see out of this change and then we will actually design a program and deliverables that produce those benefits. In an ideal world, this is where we'd like to be. In my career I've only been lucky enough to be in that situation once.

David Pembroke: Do you get involved when it's getting off the rails, generally?

Sean Worth: Generally, yeah. Generally. In a few cases I've been involved after the program's actually been launched and implemented and then people are scratching their heads saying, "So what was it that we wanted out of this? Did we get there?"

David Pembroke: Can you tell us what did we achieve?

Sean Worth: Exactly, yeah.

David Pembroke: We've spent X amount of millions of dollars.

Sean Worth: Correct. Yeah, that's right. Clearly, not the best way to be successful with change, but there we are. It's all the matter of maturity.

David Pembroke: Transformation's everywhere and there's no question that government is moving

as quickly as it can, because it has to change with everything that's going on, whether they like it or not, they have to move. How well -embedded is this notion of focusing on value? Focusing on benefits realization is a tool to develop programs and policies and regulations? Is it mature?

Sean Worth: No. It's not. It is maturing. I think that there are a couple of key challenges within government that are causing that maturation to be slower than might otherwise be the case. I think individual accountability and the culture within government at times to work hard to avoid accountability can be a challenge, because benefit realization itself and I guess, looking for value, actually right at the beginning starts to hold people account for outcomes. Government transitionally has been very input-focused, rather than output-focused. That's a cultural challenge, that I guess is slowly being moved, but it's very slow.

David Pembroke: Is it slow still now?

Sean Worth: Yeah. I think so. I think some pockets within government are moving quicker than others. Frankly, I think it comes down to leadership. There are -

David Pembroke: Here in Australia, we've had the prime minister come out and say, "We know that you have to change. We know you have to do things, you have to move, you have to ... No one's going to lose their job if they try something and it doesn't work. Test and learn. Build, test, refine." The agile concept, surely. Surely we we've all said.

Sean Worth: Surely, yes. It's a great start and certainly having the PM come out and express those opinions is very strong. I think everyone still acknowledges that government is highly risk-averse. No one necessarily wants to be the first one to stick their neck out.

David Pembroke: Risk about a program going wrong or risk about getting in trouble?

Sean Worth: I think the two are linked to some degree. I think it's harder to get in trouble if you deliver a program that hasn't actually delivered what it promised to, if no one actually really understands what it was meant to deliver. If you can point to the fact that you've spent the money that was budgeted for it, that tends to be...

David Pembroke: The fact that it achieved nothing.

Sean Worth: Exactly. From the government context, I think there's been a, risk-averse nature. B, accountability's always been focused primarily on getting money out the door rather than necessarily on outcomes. I think that is changing. The reality is since, I guess, particularly since the GFC as things have been slowly tightening and through within the Australian government there's been a long program of efficiency dividends, which have been slowly, incrementally reducing the budget for departments.

I think after a number of years of being able to take the easy runs and cut out the

easy savings, I think government is now very much hitting the stage, where in order to make change and really get value, it's becoming quite critical in order to maintain what services can be provided and the sustainability. I think the environment is really starting to move to that stage, where value more and more is going to be demanded, where ... That's joining up, transitionally, I guess the CFOs have been a lone voice, but to some degree, again, their focus has been budgetary. I think that the role of the CFO within government is changing and they are becoming more active within the departments and organizations.

David Pembroke: Around value?

Sean Worth: Around value, exactly. Each year they're asked to make budget balance and it's becoming more and more challenging. As a result, they're becoming more and more demanding to prove that these proposals for change are actually going to reap the dividends.

David Pembroke: Do you think the politics leadership of they started this and they're starting to ask harder questions at the bureaucracy to say, "You have spent X dollars, show me how it actually delivered the benefit that you said it will."

Sean Worth: Absolutely. To be totally blunt with you, I think a lot of that pressure is coming from the media to some degree. It's now more than ever, if something fails within government or something's not quite done what was promised, the media is all over it. I guess, ABS, again, to my mind, the huge amount of media coverage that resulted from the Census system challenge is difficult to imagine that same amount of pressure having been gained 15 years ago before social media.

David Pembroke: Sure.

Sean Worth: 24/7 media thing.

David Pembroke: Sure, exactly.

Sean Worth: That demand for value from the tax payer, from the public through the media into the political stage is definitely then putting pressure into the public service.

David Pembroke: Sure. That scrutiny and that ability that everyone's now has a megaphone that they carry around in their pocket and they can express a view about what's acceptable or not is, obviously, creating pressure. Wouldn't that have an immediate impact on someone's that's like, "I'm not going to do anything now, because if I do, I'm going to cop the flaming that the Australian Bureau of Statistics did, so I'll just be better to play a low risk game only here."

Sean Worth: Yep. You'd think so, but my observation is that fortunately, that's not the case. As I said, in order just to survive, departments are having to become a bit more radical as to how they approach things. Moves a foot, but particular, I guess, when we have a look at government services and with technology now enabling more and

more of those to become virtual or led by online. I think my observation is that there's a willingness to move that way, because the cost associated with these things is becoming greater. There's a larger recognition that value has to be demonstrated as a result.

David Pembroke: This is all very promising and it comes against the backdrop of greater digital transformation into all areas of the economy and the citizenry and stakeholders, they all now are connected. They're all on the grid, they all carry around these high powered computers in their pockets, which enables them to be engaged. We have the second industrial revolution, pick a tribe phrase to describe it, but the greatest change since the introduction of the printing press. Now the fact is that media production and distribution are now in the hands of everybody. We have these huge change, this huge opportunity for government to be able to go direct to build trusted relationships through content over time.

Going back to my first question, I'm not in these discussions that are taking place around value. I'm still down the corridor or around the corner of the coloring in department while all the grownups are having the conversation at the other end, whereas I can create the value, but I'm not included in those conversations. There was a great and I will try to get him on the podcast, Rory Sutherland, I think his name is. I wrote a blog post about it the other day. I think he's from Ogilvy & Mather, sorry, in London. Made a great point the other day that it's the communicators' fault that they haven't been able to communicate their value. The behavioral scientists have actually come in and cut their grass. They're doing exactly the same thing that the comms people have always done. They've dressed it up in some economic language and all of a sudden they're sitting at the table and we're still the colouring in department.

Here's my problem. I'm on the couch. How do I get from down around the corner through the door up the value and to be able to say, "Hey, guys, we can actually help you now that the world has transformed around the way that information moves, side to side, we can create content, we can engage with people, we can inform them about what you want to do, we can encourage behaviours. We can do all of those things, but we're not included in those conversations." How do we get there?

Sean Worth: I'll be totally honest, it's still a challenge. It still remains affected even having-

David Pembroke: You can't keep me out! I'm knocking.

Sean Worth: Yes.

David Pembroke: Let me in! I have a process!

Sean Worth: I guess you could try that.

David Pembroke: It's that idiot from communications again.

Sean Worth: I think to be totally honest, it is still a bit of challenge, because we are still going through that phase of realization within leadership within organizations. The change is not about the fleshy piece of technology that is going to happen. There's a slight recognition that change management, using the broader sense of the word, is actually important best investment that has to be made in relation to that. Naturally, that's where communications and all of those other things come into play.

Oddly enough, that's where my approach to benefits realization is largely about change management in reality, because for too long people have looked at an investment, looked at the technology or the hard investment that comes out of it and haven't actually truly appreciated that value only comes from actually having a smart combination of tech plus change.

David Pembroke: Yes. At the heart of all of this are people.

Sean Worth: Absolutely.

David Pembroke: You need to communicate with people. You need to tell people stories, you need to describe, you need to explain, you need to create that emotion that drives the action and then explain with the facts that validate the positions.

Sean Worth: Yep, absolutely. It's basic human nature, but the, "What's in it for me?" conversation is a critical driver in success in terms of getting the outcomes that the people are looking for. How do the communications guys or the community get in there?

David Pembroke: How long do I have to wait? I'm impatient. I want to sit at the top table, because I have this process called content marketing, which is all about the creation and curation, distribution of useful, relevant and consistent content. The purpose is to engage and inform whichever that audience is in order for them to behave in a particular way so that you will achieve whatever that action is. It is the communication model that will enable benefits to be realized. Again, look, yeah, I don't care. I'm on this journey for the next however many years and we'll continue to make the case, but I suppose I was looking for a shortcut. Give me a shortcut.

Sean Worth: I-

David Pembroke: Sorry to interrupt you, but I think the thing that comms people have got to do is rather than think of outputs and think of K, I want 5 of these, 3 of those, 2 of those, 1 of those, 6 of those through that channel, it's got to start with the business problem.

Sean Worth: Absolutely. It has to start with the value proposition ... Now I think that's ... Comms people have to be less warm and fuzzy. Comms people actually have to start focusing on the value. There needs to be that hardcore that they can intake to the

leaders within their own organization, so these changes coming on foot, there's big risk around this change of failure, big risk of failure to these factors. Communications not having the right people on board and so on. I am the person who can solve that problem for you. As you just pointed, that's moving away from we'll have these wonderful fleshy videos and all these interactive things, let's actually start talking about value of good communication rather than the products of good communication.

David Pembroke: Correct, to solve those problems. Again, one of the other big things and this is not something that I really am looking forward to particularly, but it's the maths bit. I think the comms game is increasingly becoming a maths bit. Not only maths from measuring the impact of the communications programs and calculating, applying scientific methodology to research that data analysis around the actual programs that you put in place, but it's the maths around this benefit realization piece as well. To be able to join up and say, "Look, we need to be able to prove that if you invest X in this particular communication program, we believe we can generate a 3X, 4X return based on these underlying principles and assumptions that we've made." I think the future of comms people is really, it is this challenge of mathematics. I think often it's like, "Really? Do I have to? Because we're in comms because we don't like maths."

Sean Worth: Yeah, that's right. I think at times that the conversation might be a bit easier as well, rather than I guess trying to do a hard, forward projection of value in a sense, is to weekly talk about in terms of risk management and risk mitigation. That if this component, if you through poor communications and engagement only get a 75% buy-in from the audience, you know what? You're only going to get 75% of the value. That's 25% million dollars or whatever the number is.

David Pembroke: That's the other thing in government, that the programs are so vast, so huge. Again, comms people have to take responsibility for the fact that they haven't got up out of their chairs, walked into the business line areas and understood the business sufficiently well to then be able to say, "Okay, I've got to get involved in this from solving the problems, realizing the benefit, as opposed to being in a service area that does what it's told and not ..." Anyway. It's a journey we're on. Anyway, it's all good fun.

I think benefits realization could be a bit of a tipping point for comms to be able to join the conversation, to be able to show what it can do, given the transformation that we now have in terms of the broader communications system. Everyone's on the grid. Everyone who you need to connect to in order to achieve whatever your objective ... They're there. They're carrying around that thing in their pockets, so the challenge is to how do we activate that connection in a way that over time we can convince them to why to take it up or do this or change you behavior or whatever. It's a different game to what it was not that long ago. This is where content marketing sits in it, so it is a strategic, measurable, accountable business process, so it can deliver that value and be a key part of benefits realization.

Sean Worth: Absolutely. I think that the days of build it and they will come are over. There is no such thing as passive success nowadays and passive communications likewise, it shouldn't be part of that story.

David Pembroke: Indeed. Sean, thank you very much for coming in and getting me wound up. Anyway, anyone who listens this podcast knows that that's a bit what I'm like. I think this is something that we can really grab onto, that can get us into the conversation, because that's the challenge. Let's get into those business conversations, people, content marketers of the world in government. Let's understand what those challenges are and let's bring to the table the considerable skills that we have now that we have this notion of the democratisation of the factors of media production and distribution. It's a different game and we've got something and it's something very valuable that can help our organizations and we can help strengthen communities and improve the well-being of citizens if we can help government to be more effective in their communication. Thanks very much for coming in.

Sean Worth: Pleasure, thank you.

David Pembroke: I look forward to more conversations into the future. Thank you very much, everyone. Thanks again for tuning in this week. If you do have any suggestions about people to interview, we'd love to hear them at info@contentgroup.com.au. If you'd like to get onto contentgroup.com.au and sign up to the newsletter, that would be great, because we want to continue to build out this community and certainly lots more people are joining up every week, which is fantastic. Jump on to iTunes or Stitcher, give us a review, that always helps. I know it's a bit of a hassle, but if you've got time, go and do that, that's fine. Listen, thanks again for your time, really appreciate it and we'll be back again the same time next week. Bye for now.