
InTransition Episode (HOLD) – Helen Owens

David Pembroke: Hello ladies and gentlemen and welcome once again to In Transition, the podcast that examines the practice of content marketing in government and the public sector. My name's David Pembroke and thanks for joining us once again. Today we go a little bit off the beaten track into an area that is not quite specifically about content but is vitality important in terms of engaging communities, understanding audiences and building better policy, better programs, better services and better regulation but we'll come to exactly just that topic in a moment. Before we do, as we start each week we define just exactly what it is that we're talking about.

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.

Today our guest is Helen Owens, who is the principal advisor on public data policy at the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet here in Canberra, Australia. Helen has a lot of experience in data management and policy. In her previous role she's been the assistant secretary of data policy for the department of communications and general manager of the office of spatial policy for the department of industry innovation and science. Helen provides whole of government advice on data strategy and it's applications. Helen, thanks very much for joining us In Transition.

Helen Owens: Thank you very much for having me David.

David Pembroke: It's an interesting thing, isn't it? The notion of data and being able to draw insights and to build collaboration with the civil society and engaging with government. This is a program that you are putting together and implementing, can you just explain for the listeners what is the open government partnership?

Helen Owens: The Open Government Partnership is a multi-lateral initiative that aims to secure concrete commitments from governments to promote transparency, empower citizens, fight corruption and harness new technologies to strengthen the governance around policy decisions in government. It was launched in 2011 and there are currently around 70 participating countries across the globe. In November 2015 Prime Minister Turnbull wrote to the open government partnership and confirmed that the Australian government would in turn finalize its membership of the, what we call the OGP. We like to use acronyms. In order to finalize our membership, David, we have to submit what we call a national action plan, which we are currently co-creating with civil society groups. OGP countries operate on a two year calendar cycle on their national action plans and that means that every year there's different countries submitting their new national action plans.

David Pembroke: Ultimately the benefit, what is the benefit that the citizen and stake holders are going to get that comes from this commitment to the Open Government Partnership?

Helen Owens: For us, it's actually a really exciting opportunity for government to engage much more closely with the citizens on policy development and decisions that government are taking. It's an opportunity for civil society and government to come together to work through issues around transparency, accountability of government public participation in policy decision making and innovation for our country and our region. If we are successful in joining, which we think we will be, then there's opportunity for us to do some things in the region as well.

Australia is certainly starting from a high base, David. We have a long tradition of openness and transparency. Government agencies are already in this country required to publish their annual reports, budgets, contracts to enable oversight and transparency. We also make bills and legislation open as well as parliamentary transcripts and we make all those things already open to civil society. Essentially what's in it for the country if you like is this fantastic opportunity for citizens to be engaged in the decisions of government and this is a pretty new and exciting opportunity for us.

David Pembroke: Now I perfectly agree with you that stakeholder consultation has been a very important part of policy development regulation program service delivery for a very very long time but what it seems that you're suggesting here is really the next level, which is it's not just about we're coming to ask your opinions, it's we want you to help us co-create the solution.

Helen Owens: Yes, that's correct.

David Pembroke: Now that is a big step from where we are at the moment. How do we change attitudes of policy program service areas where all of a sudden they've got to share the bench seat with somebody that perhaps they haven't had to in the past?

Helen Owens: It is very new territory for us and we've established initially an interim working group, which will, we hope it evolve into a more ... It will evolve into a more long term consultation group. Even within the interim working group where we're talking about what commitments are going to be in our national action plan. It is really challenging for government to take on board what civil society is saying to us in terms of what they would like to see in the plan and work through that with different agencies to whether that can actually be achieved and whether the ambitions that we're aiming for are high enough to achieve a satisfactory result for the civil society people.

David Pembroke: That's interesting because that's expectation management. How do you go about managing people's expectations when there is this thought perhaps of thinking, "Oh, this is great, we're going to get a seat at the table in our that fantastic idea

that I've been thinking about for all these years, it makes perfect sense. I'm just going to put it forward and it's going to be adopted." How do you manage the many exuberant contributors who will be wanting to help to build policy program services and regulation?

Helen Owens: I think, David, the key thing here is allowing citizens who are engaged with us to have a sense that they are being heard and to have an opportunity to actually talk to them about why their good idea is potentially difficult to implement, what the road blocks and barriers might be to their ideas being implemented. At the same time for government to be making compromise around our views on those issues as well. I guess what we're finding with this interim working group is that we need to be having very open dialogue and we're doing that in a very transparent way and we're currently publishing all of our minutes of the meetings that we're having. We published the agenda items, we published the agenda itself. All of these discussions that we're having are very open to anyone who wants to get engaged in this activity.

As I said, just going back I think what we're finding is that people are pretty reasonable when they sit down with the government and say, "We think there should be this policy in place," and we have the opportunity then to say, "These are the reasons why that is a good idea and yes, we're going to talk about taking that forward. This might be how we might take it forward." We also have an opportunity to say, "These are the reasons why we think that's a really bad idea," as well. Not bad idea but an idea that potentially might not be able to be implemented.

David Pembroke: Yeah, the unintended consequences that perhaps have not been thought through as clearly as they might. Again, it's interesting you're saying that it is difficult and you're accepting that it's difficult. What are the parts of it that make it difficult for government? Is it cultural elements? Is it process? Is it risk? Is governance or is it plus, plus, plus, it's all of those things?

Helen Owens: It's probably all of those things. There's a real learning curve here for us. One of the good things, I guess, about where we're at at the moment with the Open Government Partnership work is that it is embedded in the Prime Minister's portfolio. We've got the opportunity to have that dialogue with agencies and get them thinking a little bit along the lines of how do we engage with citizens on a much more transparent and equal platform, if you like.

Going forward, what we hope to do is have an ongoing consultation arrangement which will be actually one of the commitments in the plan. We see this playing out in a couple of ways. I think one would be potentially something similar to what we've got in the interim working group yet to be worked through the interim working group in terms of what that looks like in the plan. We're talking about that commitment at the working group itself and getting their ideas about what would be a great thing for them. We also see that the digital transformation office has a role to play here in terms of how do we better engage through digital platforms

with citizens? We have, in this program that we've got, we've got a blog, we've got a Wiki, we've got an email but that's not enough. We're not really reaching as far as we can in civil society by using those mechanisms because people have to know that it's there in order to engage. The real ambition in the plan is the have platforms that civil society from all walks of life can actually put in suggestions to government about policy and programs that they might think are valuable to them.

David Pembroke: I would worry because government is complex, deliberately so and it should be and it has to be. Therefore, it's not simple. Sometimes when people come to engage with it that perhaps it's obvious that you should just do it in a particular way. I do worry about people and their expectations. Have you found that in the interim working group, that people have their level of understanding of that complexity, the appetite around risk, the need for governance, the need for contestable ideas around policy and programs? Have you found that people have got a clear understanding of all of the variables that impact policy and program making?

Helen Owens: I think the membership of our interim working group is such that they, a lot of them have worked with government closely already. Their constituents potentially might not have that level of understanding. With the interim working group itself I'm very confident with those people that they understand the issues that we're facing in government and they understand the complexities. You're right though, the general citizen on the street might think that they've got a great idea which government should hear and they won't understand the difficulties that we might have in implementing that idea. What we see with this consultation platform going forward is that there ought to be a responsibility of the civil society group to actually consult with their own constituents as well, that it wouldn't just be government talking to them, that it would actually be civil society talking to civil society as well and having that dialogue within those networks to then present a joined up voice to implement government policy.

David Pembroke: It's interesting you say that because a number of programs we're working on at the moment from content group's point of view in terms of basically telling the story of government organizations, which is what we do every day. We're finding that this notion of third party assistance and third party help in terms of, "Hey, we've got a story to tell, can we actually use your channels and your audience to get the story out?" That people are happy. If there's value to their audience and if the content is relevant and specific, we're finding people saying, "Sure, send it our way because we're more than happy to try to get the message out."

Helen Owens: Yes, I agree. I think getting the message out is a big part of what we hope this government partnership arrangement will do for us.

David Pembroke: If I walk that under the bus interchange now and said, "Hey, can you tell me all about the Open Government Partnership?" I think I might get a few, "Yeah, what's that?"

Helen Owens: Oh, more than a few David. Yes.

David Pembroke: Maybe that's an ambition that one day people are on the bus on the way home talking about Open Government Partnership.

Helen Owens: Yes, I think the time will come when we're ready, when we've co-drafted the first National Action Plan and we put that out, there will be obviously a little bit of media around that. That might be an opportunity to get a broader understanding of what we're doing in this space. We are starting with a very keen group of enthusiasts who ...

David Pembroke: Yes, I know a number of them and they are both those things.

Helen Owens: Yes. We're happy to be working with them and we do see though that it is their role to actually spread the word as well that this can't just be a government initiative, it's got to be a joined up effort from both sides.

David Pembroke: Sure. Patience really, the message has got to be that, "Be patient, this is not ... Things aren't going to change overnight."

Helen Owens: That's right. We're being very pragmatic, David, with our first plan. We recognize that there are a lot of things that civil society are saying to us that they would like included in the plan, in the first plan that we're not going to be able to achieve. We've been very honest with them about that at the interim working group. We've said that some of those things though ought to be on a long term dialogue and they might appear in the second plan or the third plan. Some countries in the Open Government Partnership are already on their third plan and the whole idea around the Open Government Partnership and the direction that we get from that organisation is to raise the ambition plan on plan.

David Pembroke: Yes.

Helen Owens: It's a bit about taking baby steps to start with. Then working our way to a much more ambitious agenda going forward.

David Pembroke: Okay. Who are the rock stars of the Open Government Partnership world, globally? Who are the people who are doing things that are of interest and who've made tangible progress in their plans?

Helen Owens: I think there's a couple of notable ones that I'll bring up. One is the Ukraine. One of the interesting commitments from the Ukraine is that they drafted and passed a law that opened up Soviet era archives which had previously been closed for decades.

David Pembroke: Wow.

Helen Owens: That was, I think we thought that was pretty special. Mexico, another example, they're transforming public childcare facilities using civil society engagement as

well. The leaders in this space are the U.K., Canada, and of course the U.S. They're now on their third action plans.

David Pembroke: Is that the D5?, the Digital Five or maybe that's different?

Helen Owens: The Digital Five's something quite different.

David Pembroke: It's something different, okay.

Helen Owens: Yep. The Digital Five is all about digital government rather than open government which is an entirely different thing. We're learning from our counterparts and we're speaking to them on a regular basis. We're in close consultation with the Open Government Partnership's secretariat which we talk to on a weekly basis.

David Pembroke: Twelve months down the track, if we're sitting here, what would you hope you've been able to achieve? What would be an area that you're focusing on to say, "Okay, this is what we want to change in order to deliver a benefit to the community?"

Helen Owens: We've got a number of commitments that we're working on currently with the interim working group. These are all available and are openly available on our public website. We're working towards a program of extractive industries transparency and that's coming out of the department of industry.

David Pembroke: Climate change data? Is it what it's about?

Helen Owens: No. It's more about the transparency of industries and what the data is that they put out and transparency around their resources.

David Pembroke: Okay.

Helen Owens: Then we're working on exploring options for the beneficial ownership register of companies. That's a register of companies that shows who are the beneficiaries that are attached to that particular company.

David Pembroke: Okay. Is that out of attorney generals?

Helen Owens: No, that's out of the department of treasury.

David Pembroke: Okay. Right, yep.

Helen Owens: Yep. The other thing we're talking about is open contracting and that's about having data standards around contracting, which the interim working group are pretty keen to pursue as well. We've got a whole lot of other things on the table like whistle blower protections for the corporate sector. A lot around open data, use of public data, and what we're doing in that space. We're also talking about the

access to information access rights as well sort of in the FOI space, privacy, that sort of thing and how those things are relating to the digital world as we have it now because some of those acts were drafted well before the digital age came along.

We're having very early discussions about those things. We're looking obviously continuing the public participation activity and making sure that we've got a really really robust platform going forward for our next plan and continuing the digital transformation agenda. They're just a few, there's lots of commitments that we're looking at. Essentially what we want to do and one of the things that the interim working group raised with us just yesterday when we had our meeting was we ought to be looking at these commitments and working out precisely what the benefit to the citizens are rather than it being a benefit just to one area of society or the government benefit, it ought to be what are the broader benefits to civil society around the commitments.

David Pembroke: Will you then build that sort of benefits realization process into your processes when you're looking at, we're going through it so we got to go through that process of understanding what is that benefit and the calculations around that?

Helen Owens: Yes. That's one of the things we're looking at in terms of how we actually get to select a number of commitments.

David Pembroke: Yeah.

Helen Owens: The OGP ...

David Pembroke: I'm mad for benefits realization by the way and the audience knows that over the last few weeks. From a content point of view I think it's the step forward because the discussion is not so much about the bits and the bobs and the content assets that you create but we've start the conversation around the problems that we solve. Then trying to quantify the problems that we can solve by using content and the distribution of content to engage with citizens so they can actually understand.

Helen Owens: Yeah.

David Pembroke: Get the change happening from there.

Helen Owens: Yes.

David Pembroke: Anyways, sorry I interrupted you.

Helen Owens: Yeah, no that's alright. As far as the advice from the Open Government Partnership organization goes, they say we ought to have between five and fifteen commitments, David, in the first plan. They don't recommend you go for broke and have five hundred recommendations or commitments ...

David Pembroke: I imagine yours is a fairly small team?

Helen Owens: We have a small team working on this, yes, at the moment. I've just got three people working on it at the moment. We've obviously got some very senior representation at the interim working group as well. We've got deputy secretaries from Prime Minister and Cabinet. We have the department of finance, we've got treasury attorney generals. We've got all the central agencies involved in this at the deputy secretary level, which is really quite a very significant senior level commitment to what we're doing here.

David Pembroke: That's great. Data is something that every galah in the pet shop's talking about. Everyone's sort of across it. Where does that sit in terms of this agenda? In terms of opening up access to data, data sets that people can understand, open government, those sort of things.

Helen Owens: A big part of the plan is the open data agenda. We've got a lot of things coming together in that space, David, in terms of activities that my branch ... Leading is part of the earlier review into public data management that was undertaken by Prime Minister and Cabinet in 2015. We are responsible for implementing the recommendations of that review. We're making significant progress. There's also a range of election commitments that this government's made around making high value data openly available to the public or to businesses to generate economic activity or just for better civil society.

David Pembroke: How difficult is that to make that data available?

Helen Owens: It's easy if there are no sensitive data involved. Anything that involves records that have individual elements to it, that's very difficult to make that open obviously. We've got a lot of data sets now on data.gov.au which is our portal that we publish data on. In fact, when this government came to power data.gov.au had five hundred and fifty data sets on it and currently now searchable data sets is around about twenty-three thousand.

David Pembroke: Wow.

Helen Owens: Very short amount of time we have managed to publish a significant amount of data. All mostly non-sensitive data obviously, nothing about individuals or businesses in that space. A lot of it is spatial data. Spatial data is easy to publish because there's no sensitivities around it, it's reasonably straight forward. We've published a lot of spatial data. We also, last year the government committed to make more data open through the public data policy statement which was issued on the seventh of December last year. That essentially calls on agencies to make non-sensitive data public data open by default. That's playing into this as well.

One of the keys things we've got to do, David, though in this plan is articulate how we're going to take forward what we call the public data platform and the strategy around high value data.

David Pembroke: Is that the data.gov.au platform you're talking about?

Helen Owens: Yeah, we're going to re-engineer that and make it a whole lot more usable. We're going to increase the discover-ability of data. We're working with Data61, which is part of CSIRO.

David Pembroke: CSIRO, yep.

Helen Owens: We're building a whole new interface and back end to the public data platform. That's really exciting work for us. Some of those milestones will be contained in the National Action Plan.

David Pembroke: Yeah. Great. Are you finding that researchers are diving into this pool of data? This twenty-three thousand sets of data, lots of people, who's going in for a look?

Helen Owens: We've got a lot of universities.

David Pembroke: Yeah.

Helen Owens: Businesses are going in there. We've got start-ups, we know start-ups are using some of the data. We, last year we also made the geocode and national address file openly available which is quite a significant data set of geocoded addresses, thirty million records over Australia. We've got a lot of people using that for things like planning, logistics management, building new apps, those sort of things. We've got all walks of life actually going onto data.gov.au right now and using the data to best effect.

David Pembroke: Can you calculate the benefit that's being realized by that access to that twenty-three thousand data sets?

Helen Owens: I knew you'd ask me that. That is a really difficult thing to do.

David Pembroke: Yeah, I'm sure it is.

Helen Owens: One of the things about open data is that when you make it open, you don't have a mechanism by which you are tracking who is accessing it. If you have a data set on data.gov.au that gets downloaded fifteen hundred, four thousand times, whatever it is, we have no real way of tracking down where that data's going and how it's being used in the economy. What we are doing is doing a regular environmental scan and trying to piece together used cases for various data sets that we've got on data.gov.au and building a little bit of a case around open data and what the benefit is, economic benefit is in the economy.

The other really key thing that we're going to focus on in the next little while is one of the government efficiencies as well around making data open. One of the classic cases we've got is where the department of human services used to get, and

forgive me I can't remember the actual data set, but used to get FOI'd on a particular data set regularly, which meant that they actually had a bunch of people in their department running FOIs and they thought, "Hang on, why don't we just make this data open and go away the FOI problem?"

David Pembroke: And they can do the work.

Helen Owens: Yes. That's a really good news efficiency story for government. We're going to try and evaluate the benefits both to government but in the economy as well over time. It's not an easy thing to do.

David Pembroke: Of that particular example? Bring case studies out?

Helen Owens: Bring case studies out about how these things are making things more efficient for us but also generating economic activity.

David Pembroke: Economic, the value creation out of that will be enormous. I've got no doubt at all. I know from a content point of view, access to data is key at the beginning of the process to give you those insights around the audiences that you're seeking to reach, influence and engage. By getting access to those data sets you can really make better content because it's speaking more accurately and clearly to the needs of the people.

Helen Owens: That's right. Yep.

David Pembroke: Sounds exciting.

Helen Owens: Very exciting for us.

David Pembroke: Yeah. You know what to do, you're busy.

Helen Owens: Yes. I'm a very busy person David.

David Pembroke: You don't like sleep, which is good.

Helen Owens: I don't like sleep. I've got a great team behind me. I've got twenty-one people who are working on this.

David Pembroke: You do have a great team with you.

Helen Owens: I've got a really great team with me. Thank goodness for them. We're having fun at the moment because this agenda is front and centre. As you say, everyone's talking data, we're sort of saying data is the oil of the current economy. Everyone's got an opinion about it. We're certainly, I think we're progressing really really well in that space.

David Pembroke: Sounds like you're making really good progress.

Helen Owens: Yep.

David Pembroke: Excellent. Congratulations on that.

Helen Owens: Thank you.

David Pembroke: Thanks for coming in. I really appreciate that. It's like change up for us this week for the audience there and In Transition. Normally we're talking content and we're dealing into understanding the audience, the strategic planning, what channels are working, offline, online, all that sort of stuff. I think what we're talking about here today is something far larger really and possibly more important, dare I say it, that we do sort of grip up this opportunity. I think from a content point of view there's so much that can be learned. Ultimately the open government partnerships and the ambitions of the open government partnerships align with content marketers in the public sector because obviously it's about ultimately strengthening communities and improving the well-being of citizens. We're on the same page, we're just coming at that from a slightly different angles but the better and more comprehensive the data sets that we can get access to, the better our content is going to be. The better the stories ultimately that we will tell as well.

Helen, before we go any final information that you can offer, any insights?

Helen Owens: David, just one thing and that is if people want to get engaged with the Open Government Partnership activity, we would welcome people's engagement and you can find us at www.ogpau.govspace.gov.au. I might say that again because that's a bit of a mouthful.

David Pembroke: I'll just pull over the car.

Helen Owens: www.ogpau.govspace.gov.au.

David Pembroke: Okay.

Helen Owens: We'd be happy to have as many people in civil society as want to be engaged in this activity.

David Pembroke: Yeah.

Helen Owens: I would like to think that people like yourselves can help us with driving forward on the public data agenda. We think it's a pretty important agenda going forward for the country.

David Pembroke: Yeah, indeed. No question. All the help in the world, come and see me. I really would like to keep this going. I think it's a great story and I think, again, that the economic benefits that can be realized out of this if we can keep moving. Obviously it sounds like you got a great plan but now time to execute.

Helen Owens: Absolutely.

David Pembroke: Good luck with that.

Helen Owens: Thank you.

David Pembroke: Okay audience, thank you very much for tuning in this week. For those of you around the world, which there is a global audience to this podcast, maybe just search up the Open Government Partnership in your own country and get some access and some insight into what's going there with you as well.

Anyway, thanks to Helen Owens, very busy lady. I'm very grateful that she was able to come in the studio today to share a bit of time with us. That's about it for another week. Thanks very much for joining us and we'll be back at the same time next week. Bye for now.