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TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

Work with Purpose

EPISODE #57

LEADING FROM A DISTANCE

Hosted by David Pembroke, Founder and Chief Executive Officer,  
contentgroup

# TRANSCRIPT

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David Pembroke:

Hello everyone and welcome once again to Work with Purpose, a podcast about the Australian Public Service. My name's David Pembroke. Thanks for joining me. I begin today's podcast by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land from which we broadcast today, the Ngunnawal people and pay my respects to their elders past, present and emerging and acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and this region.

David Pembroke:

Today on Work with Purpose, we discuss the increasingly relevant topic of the challenges and opportunities of remote work, but we do so with a difference. Today we explore the topic of remote work but we do so through the lens of two leaders in the Australian Public Service who are leading teams remotely. Ali Jenkins is the first Assistant Secretary of the APS Reform Office at the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet. Since joining the APS back in 2004, Ali has undertaken a number of service delivery, policy, advisory and transformation roles in several portfolios including the Treasury, PM&C and the Department of Agriculture, Water and the Environment.

David Pembroke:

Indeed, throughout 2021, Ali led the hierarchy and classification review task force at the Australian Public Service Commission. Ali has been working remotely from Hobart since July, of 2020 and she has two small children.

David Pembroke:

Ali, welcome to Work with Purpose.

Ali Jenkins:

Hi David.

David Pembroke:

Duncan Young is the General Manager or First Assistant Secretary for Census and Data Acquisition at the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Duncan commenced his APS career in Hobart as a graduate and interestingly has worked as part of distributed and virtual teams from day one of his public service career. Duncan spent two years in Wellington, New Zealand and about 10 years in Canberra before he returned to Hobart in 2018. A personal career highlight for Duncan was the role of National Program Manager for the Australian Marriage Law Postal survey in 2017. Duncan currently leads a team of nearly 2000 people who are spread across every state and territory with only a couple of them sharing his office with him at the ABS there in Hobart. Duncan, a big welcome to you also coming to us from Tasmania today.

Duncan Young:

Thanks David and hello everyone.

David Pembroke:

So listen Duncan, we might start with you because you have been in this remote working game as you say, since the beginning of your career. How do you make remote work, work?

Duncan Young:

It's a big question David. Thank you. Yeah, Ali and I were chatting earlier but it's sort of in some ways I'm a virtual work native and she's a virtual work immigrant, having come in a bit later on. And so for me, yeah, some of it has been just life as I know it all the way along. But that said, it doesn't sort of stay with a status quo, it's kept changing. And COVID-19 brought along a whole lot of different changes. And so for me, the basis of it is, like any relationships, it's about people. And so whether it's virtual relationships or in-person relationships, focus on the people first.

David Pembroke:

And do you find that in that role of leading, that in terms of the people and I know you are a native of this remote work game, but how have you built relationships knowing that your teams have been distributed far and wide across the APS?

Duncan Young:

Yeah, probably a bit of a story I could tell. When I came in, I first got an executive job so I moved into an EL1 position as many listeners will know, from there, assistant director and I had about eight staff and most of which were outside my local office. And I thought, how do I make sure I don't forget to touch base with people? I'm not seeing them at the water cooler, I'm not seeing them in the kitchen.

Duncan Young:

And so as a good statistician, I decided to make a spreadsheet. It's a surprise I'm still married because I tried to use a spreadsheet to name our first child. So the spreadsheet is the answer to most of my life problems, but I made a spreadsheet which allowed me to see my eight staff members and press a button every time I talked to them and tell me which staff members I hadn't talked to for a period of time. And it was really interesting over a few weeks, but there was some consistent patterns. Some staff members I was talking to a lot and some I wasn't. And so what that taught me about it was actually I needed to put in place different systems because of the personality of each of my staff members and also my own relationships with them. So for some of my staff members, I'd have a regular meeting booked in, for other staff members, we just sort of met more organically as we went along.

David Pembroke:

And do you maintain that spreadsheet to this day?

Duncan Young:

Well, I'm sure there's still a good copy of it with 2000 lines in it, but I'm not using it with my current team. But I have taken forward for me, that concept of it actually. Yet I need to think about what system works for the individuals that I interact with, not assume that one size fits all in a virtual environment.

David Pembroke:

Now, a final question just before we come to Ali, what have you found that are the enemies of effectiveness in terms of that leading remote teams?

Duncan Young:

Well, for me, having fun at work is really, really important. And I think it's part, a really human kind of thing to have a good laugh with people. And I think the virtual environment, if you're not careful, can become a little bit transactional and meetings are a bit formal and they only happen when you need to get something done.

And so for me, it's really focusing on actually, how do you make sure that you value having a bit of fun, having a bit of a laugh as part of the important part of your work day and how do you make sure that you're still having that with the people you're working with? So sometimes we do that. Often we check in to the start of a meeting, like I use the first little part of the meeting, it's a bit of a routine around actually, or have a little bit of a chit chat and have a bit of a laugh before we get into the formal stuff.

David Pembroke:

Okay. Fair enough. So let Ali take us back to the time that you decided that Canberra was no longer for you. The bright lights of Hobart were calling you back, obviously, young family and all the rest of it. When did it sort of dawn on you that there was going to be the opportunity for you to continue your career and your leadership in the APS from Hobart?

Ali Jenkins:

Hello. I'm not actually a native Tasmanian, I'm a native Canberrean. So I grew up in Canberra, I went to the ANU. I didn't come from a public service family, I came from a family of tradies and I had no idea what the public service was like really, until I joined it back in 2004. But I'd had such a fulfilling career, I'd had so many interesting roles. I had worked with so many great people, so many great opportunities to make a contribution. The reason I moved to Hobart was for my family. My husband's an academic. He found a great role here at UTAS and I really wanted to support that. So we made a family decision to move to Tasmania, despite having never lived here before.

Ali Jenkins:

I'd worked for most of my career at PM&C. So I had a really solid chunk of time from about 2008, working in a range of domestic policy roles and it also had a great stint working as exec officer and the PM&C secretary. So I had a really great foundation. I really didn't want to let it go. And despite a huge amount of support from PM&C and encouragement and to sort of capture my imagination about how I could work remotely, it wasn't until COVID hit in the early months of 2020 that remote working to PM&C really seemed like a possibility to me. So it was like, I had a barrier to get over there, because I'd spent so much of my career working in an environment where I felt that face to face relationships were everything.

Ali Jenkins:

So it wasn't until I could see everyone around me transitioning to a remote working environment that I could see the possibilities for me. And so in July, 2020, PM&C said, come on Ali, get on the bandwagon. You can actually do this. You can do an SES job from Hobart. Let's give it a crack. And I said, yes. And it was one of the best decisions that I've ever made. And I've now been working 18 months, almost two years, in a range of different senior executive roles, including a period doing a review within a new agency, the APSC. And for me, it's just given me so many opportunities to try new things and experience a completely different way of being a public servant.

David Pembroke:

So tell me then, those concerns that you had, those worries that you had, those preconceived notions of what was going to hold you back, what has been reality and what has not been reality in terms of those preconceived notions you had of running a senior executive position out of Hobart?

Ali Jenkins:

I just couldn't see how I could be present in the way that I wanted to be present. And 18 months to two years ago, the technology wasn't there, you might be able to get dialled into a meeting on someone's mobile phone, but we don't have anything approaching the level of VC technology that we have now. We have mixed

meetings as a matter of course and the infrastructure to support leading teams remotely is so much stronger, but there was a big perception change for me as well. And that probably comes down to letting go.

Ali Jenkins:

I had a great piece of advice from a colleague, a PM&C colleague, who had been working for PM&C in a senior executive role from overseas. And she said, you won't be able to go to all the meetings and that's okay. You can send a team member. What a great opportunity to empower a staff member and be present in the meetings that you are not able to attend. And it's true, I can't attend all the meetings now. I can attend most of the meetings, but when I can't attend and increasingly, it's a great opportunity for more junior members of staff to get exposure to great conversations.

David Pembroke:

What do you miss about it, not being able to lead your team in the flesh?

Ali Jenkins:

I think the thing that I really miss is that for the parts of the APS where I spent a lot of time, there's a really strong, almost apprenticeship model. You get so much out of observing people in the workplace. That works for me observing my team members and understanding how best to work with them. But also, it makes a difference for team members to be able to observe their senior leaders at work, as well as their colleagues. So, that's probably what I miss the most. And I do get to Canberra once a month generally, but we've had really long periods where Tasmanians have not been able to travel to the mainland. So I've had stints and Duncan would've had the same, of sort of five or six months or even longer where we haven't been able to be present with our teams. And that means that we are challenged to do things in a different way socially.

David Pembroke:

So Duncan, as someone who is experienced in this sort of remote work distributed environment where you are now leading, as you mentioned previously and I mentioned in the introduction 2000 people. We have had COVID, we have had the great acceleration. What in your view needs to happen to start to make this more, business as usual, that leadership can be distributed across Australia for the benefit, not only of the APS and the people who work in the APS now, but perhaps to offer people the opportunity to attract them into the APS when they may not want to move their lives and their families and everything else to Canberra?

Duncan Young:

Great question, David. And I think we're well on the way. And we should sort of celebrate and as always, we're making progress. And certainly, it seems to be gone are the days that you had to have people to add a way of dialling into a meeting or, I can't remember now, it used to be a common occurrence that I'd dial into a meeting and you'd end up on a call with your lovely colleagues from Sydney, Brisbane and Melbourne. And no one in Canberra has decided to join the meeting and connect you actually into the room where the meeting's taking place. And so you talk a lot about Canberra, but not as much with Canberra. And so we seem to be getting over those things and progressing a lot further.

Duncan Young:

I guess a couple of things that I'd suggest in our next steps. One is from an individual point of view. One of my learnings along the way has been, don't be afraid to ask and have the conversation at your workplace if you do want to consider a virtual kind of arrangement or a different kind of arrangement.

Duncan Young:

So it's unlike Ali, my move to Hobart have been to come back home and to come back being close to my family, being able to spend some years with my grandparents before they passed, helping my parents out and giving my children a connection with their family. And I've certainly had some trepidation at the time of raising it, but is this putting my career on hold? Is this telling the ABS that I'm not as committed to doing all the right corporate things because I'm leaving Canberra? But to the ABS' credit, when I've talked to the ABS about it, they were very supportive and it hasn't been a barrier and I'm still able to contribute. So that's the first thing I reckon, is just encouraging people not to be afraid to sort of try new things, challenge the boundaries. And it was great to hear the encouragement that Ali was given to consider those things, moving outside.

Duncan Young:

The other is, really, I think we can still do more learning from each other in the APS. One of my favourite quotes is always, the future's here, it's just unevenly distributed. And so lots of people are working in virtual ways. For us, as in the executive, often some of our learnings in the virtual space has been to reach down and down into our teams and our staff, who've been working virtually without the access to as much travel or different mechanisms for a long period of time. And so they've got great aid mechanisms for having team celebrations when they achieve things, having ways of connecting together and supporting someone who's going through a hard time outside work. And so to reach inside your organisation, to learn from others and then reach across to other organisations which might have a bit of experience in the space that you want to learn about.

David Pembroke:

So have you had moments where you've felt that you've been missing out because you are not at head office, you're not physically present, able to have those corridor conversations, able to influence people, or have you been able to overcome those?

Duncan Young:

Have I had those moments? Absolutely. And one of the most, yet horrific things to be invited to from outside Canberra is a virtual drinks or a virtual celebration of people in Canberra, where you are basically a poster on the wall, watching people enjoy themselves, having drinks and there's no way to really engage in sort of just a general kind of group session. So yeah, it certainly had those moments along the way, but I think they've been balanced off against, you get other moments and you get other opportunities. Like when someone does come outside of Canberra to visit, or you get a chance to spend a concentrated period of time when they travel and visit an office. And certainly for us, our Hobart office benefits from that.

Duncan Young:

You do find new ways of connecting. I've found that people have reached out to me from outside Canberra, so it gives you a sort of natural connection with some other people trying to navigate the system that we're in, or it even gives a point of interest and a point of start of a conversation. And that's always a good thing to have both within your teams and working outside your teams as well.

David Pembroke:

And Ali, judging by your earlier answers, I imagine there were quite a number of moments early on that you might have felt that you weren't present, you weren't available and that you may in fact have been missing out.

Ali Jenkins:

Yeah. But the flip side of that is because when I'm in the office, it's hard to find me. I'm always sneaking around, I'm in meeting rooms, I'm all over the place. Whereas when I'm working remotely, everyone knows

exactly where I am and that's at my computer. So there's actually a higher degree of accessibility I've learned because people can connect with me in a different way. It means I can be present in a different way. But there's different things you can do just to make sure that you're present and that you're accessible, but there were certainly times and I think we've had some great advancements in technology even over the last year or two, but it felt like every meeting would be, people used to call it VC tech. You'd be seven minutes or 10 minutes of trying to get all the tech happening so you could participate. We've come a long way from there. I very rarely feel like I'm the one who's sort of sticking out as somebody who's not there in the room.

David Pembroke:

Now, this is a question to both of you and perhaps Duncan to you first, given that you are the statistician. Are you evaluating your leadership from afar in any way? I know you're keeping track there with your system or perhaps not as much as you used to, given that you now have 2000 people in your team, but is there any way that you can evaluate the good and the bad and understand it and make adjustments? And Ali I'd ask the same question of you once Duncan's finished.

Duncan Young:

This is probably a space where all of our traditional practises of leadership and seeking feedback, seeking skip level feedback, looking at things like the employee surveys, employee censuses and the like, you look to all of those sources of information and try and use them to understand, are they painting a picture that's different because of my location or is my location contributing something here or is it simply, but yeah, there's an area I need to work a little bit more on or something that I'm doing particularly well? And so I think it's always something in the back of your mind, it's something to consider. It is an interesting thing, though what I've found is that for some people, they wouldn't even think twice about the fact that they've got a remote team member or a remote boss or a remote staff member, whereas others it's one of the first things they think of.

Duncan Young:

And so, again, it's trying to navigate through, where is someone coming from and what experiences have they had? So in the same way as if you took someone from outside the ABS and through them in to our environment, you'd be really conscious that they have to learn some of the statistical language and terminology. They need to get used to some of our systems and our lovely spreadsheets. It's the same ways, if you take someone and put them into a virtual environment, you need to say, right, well, how do we swim here? Like let's work through and understand that this might not be native to you and work out what are the things you want to know about and even just for little things like, well, I'm contactable by multiple channels and my staff will be reaching out through messages, through instant message app, through WhatsApp, through Signal, through email, booking a time. Any of those things are okay for me and they work for me.

Duncan Young:

For some of my team, they might have different things which work best for them. And so it's sort of making sure you spend some of that time working through, because maybe the default behaviour of walking to an office and seeing if the door is open or not, but that's not just the only method here, there's different ways to think about it. And one of the worst things I've seen is, probably when I'd sort of started working remotely, was people kept saving things up till the next time I travelled. Oh yeah, Dave, we'll talk about that next time you visit. It's like, don't leave me hanging here. Like let's talk about it now. Let's get into this because I don't think that's productive for us to defer things to later. And actually, I'm sure we can think of much better things to do when we catch up in person.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. And for you Ali, that evaluation piece, how are you judging your effectiveness?

Ali Jenkins:

I could not agree more with what Duncan is saying about relying on sort of the more traditional methods. The best way to understand your impact on your team and the others around you is to actually ask them and that's the best way to learn and change. I think we and I think Duncan's probably the same, you've been doing this for a lot longer than I have. We don't want to be in the situation of just scraping by as leaders who are leading teams remotely, we want to figure out how to do it really well. And we want our teams to have those skills as well, because they're going to have long and diverse careers. They might be, well, I'd hope they'll be leading teams in person and remotely throughout their careers as well. So now's a really great opportunity to identify the skills, to do that really, really effectively.

David Pembroke:

And a final question to both of you. And listeners often tell us that they love to hear the personal stories. And so I'd be interested just, what have you discovered about yourself since you've been leading remotely? What's a personal sort of reflection on something that you've learned about yourself that perhaps wasn't exposed when you were doing things previously? Maybe a little bit different for you Duncan, but given that you did only move down to Tasmania not that long ago to lead such a large team. But Ali, with you first, what have you learned about yourself?

Ali Jenkins:

I think the best thing has been to and I guess this is the sort of thing that I probably should have been doing throughout my career, but really meet people where they're at. You get an opportunity when you're engaging with people on a screen all the time, to have really dedicated and focused time. So you can often be freed from distractions with your team members and that means that you can really, really connect with them.

Ali Jenkins:

The other thing I've really learned is and this sounds a little bit cringey, but how do you build a connection and how do you build intimacy with people? Which is not trying to be a superficial way of building connection, but what's a really real way? And what I find is that I probably overshare with my team members. And I probably overshare with people because it's a good way to build a connection, to share something of yourself and hopefully people will give you something in return. So my team members all know way too much about my children, they know way too much about the birthday parties I attend on the weekend, they know just a lot about my life and I hope that's not too much information for my team, but just finding different ways to share and connect with people is just really, really important. That's just one thing that I've really tried to engage with.

David Pembroke:

Excellent. And you Duncan, you said that you like to start meetings with a few gags, a few dad jokes, I hope.

Duncan Young:

Yeah. Well, certainly one of the things we've talked a lot about relationships in this, because this is such an important part of our work. And one of the things you do notice as the virtual meeting attendee, is often you are the first one to the meeting because everyone else has to get up from their last meeting, run out the door, down a set of stairs, get away from another conversation and get into the meeting. And so often you do have these few minutes at the start where you can sort of catch up with people who have got there on time. But probably the area I was going to focus on is actually, you do learn a little bit about yourself and about how to be productive, and for me, what are some of the barriers to my productivity when you sort of work remotely and virtually.



Duncan Young:

And so I've learned a little bit about the disconnect between my mental impression of how much I can multitask and the actual ability to multitask. And probably the most amusing moment was during a rather long meeting where I was doing a lot of sitting on mute and a lot of listening and a little bit of playing on my laptop and I found a set of features which allowed me to change the camera settings on my laptop. And then I suddenly noticed that everyone in the room was looking at me and I looked down at the corner and I realised I had turned myself into a shark avatar. And so suddenly there was a lovely blue shark in this ABS corporate meeting. And so the shark started trying to hit his keyboard with his flippers and he was trying to turn off his shark avatar. And that was quite a good sage lesson in the get.

Duncan Young:

I do find still, it is so easy in this environment we work in now. And we all work in it, no matter whether you're in Canberra or outside, is to feel, actually I can do something else here, I'm still focusing. Actually, no, you're not. Like you do need to bring that same kind of discipline. I wouldn't yet pick up my phone and send a bunch of text message whilst we're sitting there talking being at a table physically. I shouldn't do that with you when I'm sitting there virtually. And so that's one of the things I've learned, is my own limitations. I can't do multiple things at once and give them all a hundred percent of attention.

Ali Jenkins:

And one thing that Duncan and I have discussed, which is the fact that we both live in Tasmania and we can also have a bit of escape and escape from the APS. I know as somebody who has spent so much time in Canberra and grew up there that a lot of my weekends or the children's birthday parties I might be attending in Canberra, I'd be doing a lot of APS chats. Not the case here. I feel like I have so many sorts of different connections, which I think sort of help to bring a different dimension to my work as well.

Duncan Young:

Yeah. I was telling Ali about this. When I just moved back down, I went along to my son's school camp and one of the other parents said to me, he said, oh, I hear you're a public servant. I said, yeah, that's what I am. I work for the public service. He goes, I just always really wanted to ask someone like, I've heard of public servants, I just don't know what they do. Like what is a public servant? And I thought, imagine that question in Canberra. So, yeah, certainly it's a different kind of experience down here and yeah, it's part of what I love about it.

David Pembroke:

Do you see it taking hold in a big way and seeing large numbers of people leaving Canberra? Or is there, I don't know, a sort of ballast that needs to stay in Canberra and it's really only ever going to be something that works for a few, not for the many.

Duncan Young:

So the ABS has more than half of its staff outside Canberra and so for me, I don't think about it as Canberra and everywhere else. It's just a way of working no matter where you are, but certainly I think the public service really will want to and need to continue to capitalise on getting the best people where the best people want to work. And yeah, increasingly, I think people will say actually, why not? Why can't I work somewhere different? So I think it will increase.

Ali Jenkins:

Yeah. There's just a huge factor of understanding where the talent is, making sure that we can access great talent in the APS. So I think we're a lot more open minded about it than we used to be. The other thing is,

apart from attracting great talent, it also allows the APS to retain talent. There would've been lots of people over the years who had to make a choice to forego their APS career because they were moving away from Canberra for a range of reasons and now I think we don't have to make as many of those choices. Which is, particularly for someone like me, who's been able to maintain a really happy and fulfilling career in the APS while moving interstate. There's lots of different benefits that we can gain.

David Pembroke:

Any barriers...Sorry, Duncan. I interrupted you.

Duncan Young:

Oh, I was just going to say for the Canberrans listening, I do miss Canberra. I lived there for 10 years and it is a beautiful place and yeah, I certainly don't want to come across as being, all things are good outside the beautiful city of Canberra, but I think it is about the maximum choice you can give people around the way they work and where they work, the more likely you are to maintain and build engagement and keep people working on our good work.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. Well, I think that your two particular examples are very good ones. Well, both family based but both quite reasonable and relevant and appropriate that you would then have that conversation. So I can imagine that a lot of people listening and thinking, well, if that does happen to me, I feel that I could have the conversation. And it's encouraging to know that for you Ali, you were encouraged and Duncan, you were encouraged as well when you got that opportunity because I sometimes feel that, again, this is on the edge of experimentation and it's good to see that it's happening in the APS.

Ali Jenkins:

I sometimes think about all of the amazing women who had to gather up the courage to ask their employers for part-time working arrangements and how difficult that must have been, but how it's completely the norm in the APS for good reason. And I think a lot of the conversations that public servants are able to have with their managers today about flexibility, remote working, making some different choices, are really built on the foundations of a lot of public service who've gone before us and had difficult conversations.

David Pembroke:

Yeah. Very good. Well, listen, thank you so much for joining us remotely. If you were in Canberra, we could be sitting in the same studio, but we're not. But thanks for sharing your stories with the audience today because I think it is such an important topic and it's not something that's going to go away, it's going to be a part of the future. And I've been really intrigued by that idea of perhaps starting to build a community of practice where you can learn from each other, you can learn best practice and it can become a muscle that gets exercised and it can grow stronger. And the APS continue to evolve and strengthen and be able to deliver benefit to the citizens of Australia through these distributed teams. So thank you so much for your time today. A fascinating conversation. So thank you very much Ali and thank you, Duncan.

Duncan Young:

Thanks, David. Pleasure.

Ali Jenkins:

Thanks, David.

David Pembroke:

Ladies and gentlemen, Work with Purpose is a part of the GovComms podcast network and we would be both delighted and grateful if you could find the time to give us a nice rating or a review, because what it does is it helps the program to be found.

David Pembroke:

Thanks again, to the amazing team at IPAA and to the Australian Public Service Commission for their ongoing support for this particular program and for the team at contentgroup for making it happen with the technology and the production and the promotion and everything else. My name is David Pembroke, a big thanks again to both Ali and Duncan for coming along today. That's it for now. We'll be back at the same time in two weeks, but for the moment, it's by for now.

Voiceover:

Work with Purpose is a production of contentgroup in partnership with the Institute of Public Administration Australia and with the support of the Australian Public Service Commission.