



contentgroup

TRANSCRIPT OF PODCAST

Work with Purpose

EPISODE #63

THE QUESTACON EXPERIENCE

Hosted by Megan Aponte-Payne, Industry and Expert Insights, Office of
Supply Chain Resilience, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet

TRANSCRIPT

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. Today, a conversation about Questacon, and it's hosted by Megan Aponte-Payne.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

Hello everyone, and welcome to another episode of Work with Purpose, a podcast series run by the Institute of Public Administration Australia ACT, in partnership with contentgroup and with the support of the Australian Public Service Commission.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

I begin today's podcast by acknowledging the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting on today, the Ngunnawal people, and I pay my respects to their elders, past, present and emerging. I also acknowledge the ongoing contribution they make to the life of our city and to this region. I'd also like to acknowledge the custodians of all the lands from where anybody listening into this podcast today is joining us from.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

Our conversation today promises to be a fun one. It's called the Questacon Experience. We hope to explore the diversity of Questacon's workforce and operations, as well as the focus on creativity and innovative thinking that positions Questacon somewhat independently from its APS counterparts. And to do that, I'm joined today by three fabulous leaders from Questacon.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

Firstly, Kate Driver. Kate is the deputy director of Questacon, overseeing the operational aspects of all of Questacon's local, national and international activities. Following her graduation on a full performance-based undergraduate scholarship with first class honours and a university medal in law, an impressive resume, I must say, Kate later moved away from legal practise and worked across a variety of policy, programme, corporate and task force roles in federal government. Kate then joined Questacon in 2014 and has been there ever since. Welcome Kate.

Kate Driver:

Thanks, Megan.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

And next we have David Cannell. David has been a professional and amateur performer in Canberra for over 30 years. Combining a love of theatre and science, he mashed an original honours degree in zoology in biochemistry with strong theatre urges into a graduate diploma in science communication through the Questacon Science Circus in 1997. In 2000, David formed Questacon's Excited Particles Science Theatre team, and has been working as a writer, performer, paleontologist and science communicator ever since. He currently works as the Questacon learning program's content development officer when he's not on stage in some musical extravaganza or competitive pun battle.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

So welcome, David.

David Cannell:

Thank you.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

And finally, Rachel Ball. Rachel is an exhibition designer for Questacon. She's been with Questacon for the last 10 years, working on a diverse range of projects, including permanent and travelling exhibitions, individual exhibits and interactive designs. Rachel's background is in industrial design, allowing her to bring her skills and knowledge of 3D design plus ergonomics and user experience to the Questacon exhibition development team. And I must say I saw the awards that Rachel designed for the recent IPAA Spirit of Service Awards and they were out of this world. So welcome, Rachel.

Rachel Ball:

Thanks Megan.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

Our topic today is the Questacon Experience. I'm sure you'd all agree, Questacon offers a very different APS employment environment and experience. The distinct nature of its business, both within the white building by the lake, that we all know, but also across the nation, attracts an eclectic and quite different staff demographic from perhaps the quintessential policy-driven public sector agency that some of us might know better.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

So Kate, Rachel and David, I was hoping to open the discussion today by hearing a bit more about what each of you does at Questacon. So Kate, could you start by providing us a brief overview of what your role is?

Kate Driver:

Sure. It's really simple. Questacon has a tiny but mighty executive of a director, Professor Graham Durant, and two deputies, Dr Bobby Cerini, who is the general manager of science and learning, and I'm the general manager of operations. Basically it boils down to, Bobby comes up with the amazing science and I run stuff. So, Questacon operates out of the main building that most people would know either from their year six excursion or if they're local to Canberra, visits during school holidays. But we also have a second facility, which is about that youth teen entrepreneurship model, that's actually out at the old Royal Australian Mint, which also houses our design team, our exhibition workshop and all of our travelling programmes that reach out across the country, which is actually about two thirds of what Questacon does. It's much more than the building. So I keep all that stuff running, basically.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

Oh, wow. And Rachel, are you based out at that other building that we're less familiar with?

Rachel Ball:

Yes. Yeah. I'm based in the Deakin building.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

And you work on the design side of things, is that right?

Rachel Ball:

Yeah. I work on all the travelling and permanent exhibitions as part of the 3D exhibition design team, and also other interactive exhibits. I work as part of the exhibition development team, which combines our 3D team as well as our content developers, our graphic designers, our draughts persons exhibit, IT specialists and production specialists. So yeah.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

That's quite an array. So, we've got a manager, we've got a designer and we've got a performer. Is that right, David?

David Cannell:

I ran the Questacon performance team for about 20 years. Also taking it from not really much of anything to a gigantic, sprawling, giant, mutated tentacle beast. And then I actually stepped back from that role and into just a role of content development, where basically I get asked to have ideas. I also get asked to do the strange things that no one can think of anything else or anyone else to do. Quick, we need someone to do this TV into. We need someone to dress up as a dinosaur. We need someone to do this thing with the morning cross for Sunrise Australia. We need someone to do something strange. And so when not being asked to do something strange, I try and come up with other strange ideas myself.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

I'm very impressed that you get paid to come up with ideas.

David Cannell:

That's what I think.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

I don't feel there's many jobs within the public service that would let you have the same creativity that it sounds like you have. And on that, Kate, I was wondering if you could tell us about Questacon's purpose and values from an internal perspective. What are the opportunities that Questacon offers that perhaps differentiate you from other APS agencies?

Kate Driver:

So before I go there, I'm going to give you a quiz. I want you to guess which Prime Minister said this. "If we are to have an economy restructured so as to allow a sustainable prosperity in the future, we need to get the fundamentals right first, and one of those fundamentals is scientific research. It has been argued by the Australian scientific community that the hands and minds that should shape Australian science into the next century are not being attracted to careers in science. If that is so, it would be a tragedy for us all. What is needed is a concerted national effort to encourage the further development of science and technology in Australia." Which Prime Minister do you think said that?

Kate Driver:

It could be any Prime Minister because this is part of our national role, but this was actually in the opening speech by Bob Hawke, the Prime Minister who opened Questacon in 1988. So Questacon's actually come from this nation building national story about our future, because part of the work that we do for a future economy, whether you're 34 years ago, or whether you're actually today, is based in STEM skills, but it's also based in creativity and imagination. Because if you can't imagine a different future, then how are you going to create it?

And that's actually what we're here for. This is why the Australian Government invests in those future skills, those future attributes and attitudes, that's about young people, their teachers, families and communities. And so what we do is we inspire attitudes towards science. We don't actually replace the education system, but we play an important role as a national cultural institution, actually connecting people in their own context to science and to STEM concepts.

Kate Driver:

So we do that by travelling across the country. We do that by bringing people into our centres. We do it with teachers. So, everybody can imagine that one teacher that changed their life and we could do a whole other podcast on that, but that's the best investment in a generation upon generation in a classroom. Young people are really influenced by their parents, so we connect to communities as well as the students in their own classrooms.

Kate Driver:

And so Questacon is very driven by these original founding values. And if you actually look back at Bob Hawke's opening speech in 1988 and the original cabinet submission that was released not long ago, we actually hold really true to those fundamentals. We are here to create a better future for all Australians through engagement with science, technology and innovation. And that's been our vision statement for a very, very long time because it continues to hold true.

Kate Driver:

So that's basically what drives us. But the reason that it's not just you and I having a conversation is also because I wanted to bring some of my people so that you could see different aspects of how we actually bring that to life because the culture of Questacon does have a little bit of magic in it. And it's actually how we run with that creativity inspiration piece that actually drives a culture within Questacon and makes it a different side to the APS, because we're all still driven by service. We're all still driven by community, but the way we execute it is actually very, very different.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

Hmm. So different. I love that point about if you can't dream it, you can't be it. And I think I might want to come and work for Questacon.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

David, building on that point about creativity, can you tell us a bit about the types of creative educational programmes that your team offers and how you manage and promote creativity?

David Cannell:

Within the learning programmes team, we do basic science shows. We also cater for younger age groups with early science learning through a thing called Science Time, where people can come in every fortnight. We do puppet shows during the school holidays on top of that for early learning. We have a tinker studio where it's more of a maker space where you can actually use your hands to create and workshop things, as you go through. In the Q Lab, it's more of a facilitated learning where we're doing experiments, but we're asking kids to predict and guess what's going to happen, and what will the repercussions of this experiment be? What does this mean? What can you say about this? So, we're trying to involve the children in those learning experiences.

David Cannell:

And there's so much there that involves people having some creative spark and saying, oh, okay, this time, this holidays, we're just going to work with sticks and bits of elastic bands. We're going to let people just go crazy with sticks, about a foot and a half long, and some elastic bands. What can they make? Let's see what they can do. We have no idea where that's going to go, and it could be absolute disaster. And suddenly it's World War III up there as everyone's making small catapults and things. Or it could be, oh my goodness, there's a gigantic castle, which is evolving or such up in gallery five. So it requires our team to be full of creative people. But we do a good job of managing those expectations. If we have one of our younger, more inexperienced team members, we actually will mentor, we'll assign one of our officer staff to actually work with them and help them through some of the issues that they might be having. We have frequent meetings in our laser pterodactyl meeting.

Kate Driver:

That's a real meeting, by the way.

David Cannell:

That is a real meeting. Other Questacon teams had tiger team meetings and we thought, we don't want a tiger team meeting. We want a laser pterodactyl meeting.

Kate Driver:

The perennial favourites of Questacon, astronauts and dinosaurs.

David Cannell:

So much. Oh, don't get me started on dinosaurs.

Kate Driver:

I think you should talk about dinosaurs.

David Cannell:

I think that's probably another section.

Kate Driver:

He needs his own podcast for dinosaurs actually.

David Cannell:

But we manage the safety aspects because we're doing a lot of things with dangerous chemicals, with explosives, with cryogenic substances. So we keep an incredibly tight lid on exactly how safe we are doing things with a weekly safety meeting, where we go through our procedures with a fine tooth comb. But also, we try and encourage people. We try and help them, and we have offices to take on a small project for a short time, be mentored for a short time or assist for a short time on whatever big project it is we might be working on, whether it's the school holidays it's a big festival for Graham leaving shortly. There's a big TV show that's coming into the centre and we need to put some heads together to think for that. But we're always trying to think up what's something new. What's something fun, and what's something that will inspire kids and families and the younger scientists of tomorrow to really enjoy and get something out of science?

Kate Driver:

Yeah, you're underselling the theoretical stuff that sits below this too, because the team are so effortless in creating something that's fun and amazing. What I learned and what I was most surprised at when I started at Questacon was the depth of educational theory and psychology that sits behind everything we do. Everything's really intentional. Everything is very targeted and very well-designed. There is so much thought in everything that the team do, that they effortlessly just wheel out and engage people with. But there's a lot of theory that sits behind it. And there's a very, very deep well of knowledge in the team that sits behind those fun things. It's really hard to make stuff fun without making it feel like it's a bit twee or a bit naff. You try to tell a 14 year old to do their maths lessons because it's good for them, you may as well tell them to eat their Brussels sprouts. So the art is actually in the engagement and in making it fun, because that's part of the vision here, is connecting people to something that they have a lifelong attitude towards.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

Yeah, no, that makes perfect sense. A bit like a duck paddling under the water and you just see the above part, not all of the work that's going on.

David Cannell:

Yeah, there's massive amounts of things. We recently came up with something called the show bones document, which is, so you want to do a show on spiders, fabulous, lovely topic. And we actually went through this with an exhibition a few years back. And so we then had to come up with, okay, so what is the point? You need to say, what is the point of this show in one sentence. And then we need to unpack everything from that sentence, and what are the things that we can do? What are the demonstrations that we can do? What are the involving volunteering concepts that we can do? What is the multimedia that we can have? And everything then comes down from this one sentence. We want to show this, we want to do this. Everything comes down and when looking from the outside, you would think, oh, how on earth did you put that together?

David Cannell:

But no, it just comes down from trying to concentrate everything into a certain statement, sentence or so, and then letting everything just flow. And then someone comes up and says, "Oh, you should do that with that great experiment where you pull nylon out, they will make it ultraviolet so they can see. We'll turn off the lights and we show how a spider's web is formed. And oh, well, let's talk about the difference between modern spiders and ancient spiders. Let's look about the evolution of spiders." And suddenly there's 30 different ideas that come down from someone saying, we should do a spiders thing.

Kate Driver:

As an arachnophobe, I was a little shocked...

David Cannell:

I was an arachnophobe when we had to do that.

Kate Driver:

We actually paid people to keep the spiders alive.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

It sounds like purpose is really important and being really clear on your purpose. Rachel, from a design perspective, how important is the design of the physical spaces, both for exhibitions, but also the office environment, for fostering this sense of creativity and innovative thinking.

Rachel Ball:

It's really important, especially when you're dealing with subject matter like spiders, where you want people to come in and experience that exhibition, that would be terrified of spiders. How do we make an environment that's not scary? Because our initial thoughts are let's make big, giant spiders everywhere that are coming in and going over the top.

Kate Driver:

I'm not down with that.

Rachel Ball:

We didn't want people to be scared off from the subject matter by how we created the space. So we wanted to bring in a lot of warmer tones, and we focused more on the peacock spider, which, it's a cute spider.

David Cannell:

Oh, he's so cute.

Rachel Ball:

He's so cute, so that it's more approachable and people wanted to learn in that space. Bringing in pops of colour instead of making it dark and oh, Halloweeny, so that people will absorb that subject matter. But then in other spaces like the tinker studio, making a space that people feel like they can get messy, and they can explore and they can build. So in that particular exhibition, we made it out of recycled timber and bits and pieces, so it felt like your shed, your back shed, so that you felt like it was okay to explore and create mess and drop things on the floor, and it didn't matter, so that you could come up with amazing ideas within that space with the programme people.

Rachel Ball:

But then again, in the office space, it's also important considering how having lighting, having open spaces to spread your mess, your purposeful mess, because when we're in the design process, we need to bring in a lot of different things and spread it out in front of us so that we can see and then pull it and refine it and narrow down to having a concise idea that's well considered and meets our brief that's been set for us. So yeah, having everything from the lighting to the materials of the floor and the wall, and then also the exhibit materials as well. It all plays a big contribution to creating that immersive space.

Kate Driver:

Yeah, the culture's one of play. So yeah, we get grown up, we put on suits and blazers to go to work in office buildings and we suddenly lose all the joy and the fun, but that's where creativity lives. And so when the design team is creating something new, they really don't create parameters and block themselves down yet. They have to explore, they have to experiment and play. We're telling young people to do it, so we do it ourselves. And I know Rachel walked through the design space not long ago and we were playing with all sorts of different materials for the IPAA awards. And there must have been, I don't even know how many materials you went through, but you had to play with it, didn't you?

Rachel Ball:

Yeah. I think I had about 20 different glass panes to come down to two different coloured glass, looking at texture. You need to think big in order to come up with great ideas and not think any idea is silly or stupid, because they can always lead to a better idea.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

And it sounds like obviously kids and school age kids in particular, is a big target audience for you. But what about for the parents or the adults? How do you find they respond? Perhaps David, how do you find they respond too?

David Cannell:

Well, adults really get excited by a lot of the same things that kids do, except they're all more reserved. There's a lot more, "No, no, no, no, no. I don't like to show my interest or anything. I will just... What was that?" But they're just as equally excitable, and we've had occasions where we will do adults only nights, and we will open up the centre for just adults. And there'll be a few lubricating drinks downstairs, and then people will go and play just like the kids do. And they're roaring down the slide and dropping down and playing with all the different exhibits. And sometimes you have to tell them not to run, just like the kids. And sometimes we do special adults nights, like we did Science of Gin, Science of Whiskey, Science of Tequila.

Kate Driver:

Whiskey Business is a favourite show of mine.

David Cannell:

Whiskey Business, yeah, where we go through some of the science of how do you put tequila together? What are the different sorts of gins or tequilas? And as a special audience thing. And yes, you can drink during this. So we provide for that.

Kate Driver:

Imagine signing off that procurement, "Kate, we'd like to spend \$2,000 on gin. It's totally legit."

David Cannell:

I know where that cupboard is as well.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

I feel like only at Questacon would that fly.

David Cannell:

There's a huge, enormous market out there for making science for grownups. It doesn't have to be just for children. Questacon may decide that it would actually be counterproductive if we just focused on doing adults only science type things. But we have investigated such things in the past. There is many different audiences out there and it's just a matter of sometimes tailoring the science and tailoring the information and the engagement to suit that age bracket. But there's still always going to be interest in, that's an amazing dinosaur, that's a fantastic picture of space. This is a glorious, big demonstration or a big explosion. Everybody's going to be interested in that. It's just how you tailor it.

Kate Driver:

Other than when the Bachelor came to Questacon and did an astronomy show with Brian Schmidt, have I actually seen the queue longer, and it was the Science of Sex, X-rated science for adults.

David Cannell:

That was a great night.

Kate Driver:

It was an epic night. People are interested.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

And maybe when it's under the name of science, they feel like they can explore it more legitimately. I'm interested, Kate, in your role and the fact that you've got all of these fun, creative things going on around you, but you've still got an organisation to manage. How do you balance perhaps that tension between all of these amazing ideas that are coming up with procurement rules, PGPA Act, Safety Act, et cetera?

Kate Driver:

Look, it is a challenge. It's not like sitting in an office building. You have to really understand what we're about. You have to understand what we're trying to achieve, and we do have really comprehensive processes in place. During the COVID pandemic, it took two days and about 15 pages to close Questacon down during the first shutdown. And it took three weeks and about 500 pages of documentation, safety arrangements. We had to comply with about five or six different COVID safe protocols and different arrangements and so on. And we were literally working with the chief medical officer's team from the ACT, trying to figure out how you actually fitted in. And that's reflective of the way that Questacon operates. It's always a bit outside. I describe us as the red-headed stepchild of the Commonwealth family photo. No one quite knows who our parents are. No one quite knows where we fit in, but we are quirky and we are different, and people enjoy the fact that we're there. And I can say that as the only blonde in a family full of redheads as well.

Kate Driver:

So look, it is a challenge. But fundamentally, good administration and good process and good safety, has to sit at the base of what we do. Because we are really driven by that public purpose and really serving the Australian community, it's not difficult to translate. But sometimes it takes a few mental gymnastics to figure out how the heck you're meant to fit something really quite unique into a very bureaucratically focused system. So often we tend to work our way through it with our colleagues, particularly in our Department of Industry, our parent department. We've gone on a journey with our colleagues, into understanding how the business needs to achieve what it does, while also still complying with those things. And look, generally, we get there, but it does take a little bit of negotiating and navigating at times. We have so much great support from our parent department, from our corporate colleagues, there's always a willingness to find a way. It just might take a little longer.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

That's wonderful to hear. And Rachel, I wanted to ask you which project you've been involved in that you've been most proud of.

Rachel Ball:

Oh, it's so hard to pick. They're all so different. And I've learned so much from each one, because I don't have a science background. So learning all these new science things, every time our science matter, every time we do a new exhibition, but I've really enjoyed working on the tinker space, developing that as well as the IPRA awards. I've developed that over six, seven years now, I think like eight or different designs or more. Then our travelling exhibitions as well, from the Science Circus redevelopment to subject matter, colour and spiders, born and built, space, enterprise Australian, all different sorts of subject matter, which is really interesting, and trying to create an environment to display all those ideas, to reflect each individual exhibition. Yeah. It's hard to pick. It's like picking, which is your favourite child.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

It sounds like constantly changing too, new challenges. That sounds great.

Rachel Ball:

That's it.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

It sounds like creativity and innovation is such an important part of working at Questacon. As we close today, David, Kate and Rachel, I wanted to ask you each, what is one simple practise that our listeners can adopt in their own lives or maybe their workplaces, to be more creative and innovative, just like you guys at Questacon? And David, I'll go to you first.

David Cannell:

I like to put myself in the space. If I'm trying to think of a new demonstration, a new show or a performance, I like to, maybe if I can, go to where it's going to be, and I try and put myself in the mindset of a hyperactive 12 year old, 10 year old, drunk adult, whatever. I think, what do I want to see? What would I really get a kick out of seeing? And I try and encapsulate that feeling and then try and make that happen. That's one of the first things. The second thing I would say, I know you asked for one, but I'm going to say two.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

Go for it.

David Cannell:

Which is an environment where mistakes are not an issue. If you establish an environment where mistakes are not punished, where mistakes are seen as a learning opportunity, where you have the licence to stretch your wings and go, well, let's see how this... Whoops, that was bad. But you've learned something. And sometimes you learn something more from a failed experiment than a successful experiment. So it's that positive environment of acceptance, of there's going to be some creative people and they're going to do some creative things and it might not always turn out brilliantly, but we're always going to learn.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

Great advice. Rachel?

Rachel Ball:

My main thing to be creative is that there's no silly ideas. Every idea leads to a new idea. You be broad and then narrow it down. Don't narrow it before you've even began. But my favourite thing that I learned for being creative from uni as well, is that don't worry about being a brand new idea. You're never going to have a brand new idea. It's always building on top of another idea. So, and that itself is an original idea. So, you don't have to recreate the wheel to come up with something that's new and creative.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

Yeah. Lovely advice. And Kate?

Kate Driver:

Look for me, I've been an SES officer for a really long time. I've worked across a number of departments in policy and programmes. I've run grants programmes, I've run corporate functions. One of the greatest joys I've had is stepping into an incredible group of talented and passionate people. And David and Rachel have summed up what the culture is. So for me, as an SES leader in the organisation, it's about leaning into that culture and embracing it and letting our people be amazing and giving them the trust to run with it. You're there as a safety net. You're there as a support. You're there to navigate some of the stuff like procurement rules and Senate estimates, and making sure that we do it safely. But at the end of the day for SES leaders to create that culture of creativity and positivity, that's actually focused on what we are here for. And for us, it's about young Australians, their teachers, families and communities. If you can keep that as a touchstone of the culture, then amazing people are amazing and you've done your job.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

I love that. I'm hearing a lot about trust and innovation, that no idea is a bad idea and that staying true to your purpose as long as you know what you're aiming for and then allowing people to be as creative as possible to get there, seems to be working so well for you guys. Thanks, Kate and David and Rachel, for a really great conversation today. I've found it fascinating. And I think you might have a new recruit for Questacon here.

Kate Driver:

Welcome anytime.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

Thanks again for sharing your insights and also bringing us into your world at Questacon, I think beyond the white building at the lake.

Megan Aponte-Payne :

This brings our Work with Purpose episode to a close for today. Thank you to you, our listeners, for joining us, and goodbye for now.

David Pembroke:

So there you go, a wonderful conversation with the team from Questacon, with Megan Aponte-Payne, and a big thanks to everyone for that conversation, because I believe Questacon is such an icon in Australia and in Canberra, that it's great that we do shine a light on these niche areas inside the Australian Public Service.

David Pembroke:

Work with Purpose is part of the GovComms podcast network, and if you do have the opportunity for a rating or a review, that would be gratefully accepted because it does help the programme to be found. As always, a very big thanks to the team at IPAA and to the Australian Public Service Commission and also to the team at contentgroup who helps get the programme to air each week. My name's David Pembroke. Thanks again for joining us on Work with Purpose. We'll be back at the same time in two weeks, but for the moment it's bye 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.