

# TURNING ONE'S THINKING AROUND beyond the rhetoric of customer focus



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**Customer focus... it's one of those phrases that's become ingrained in our work culture. It's so familiar, indeed, that it's almost lost its meaning. But as editor JOHN O'LEARY found out, innovative, customer-centric initiatives across a raft of public sector agencies are giving new meaning to the words.**

Imagine a one-stop shop where you can go to do all the things you have to do when a baby is born: registering the child, getting him or her a tax number, organising a passport, assessing the benefits available and so on. Imagine, moreover, that this one-stop shop is virtual – that you can do all these things from home via your PC, or even through a tablet or smartphone if you're on the move.

Sounds futuristic? In a way it is – but in fact such a one-stop virtual shop is already being built as part of the larger Better Public Services Result 10 programme which aims to make it easier for New Zealanders to complete their transactions with government in a digital environment.

"We started in 2015 with Birth Registrations Online," says Jeff Montgomery, Registrar General and General Manager–Births, Deaths, Marriages, Citizenship, and Translations. "BRO has made it possible for new parents to register their child online rather than by sending in paper forms through the post.

"Parents can also order a birth certificate and apply for an IRD number for their child. Doing these things online saves the parents time and hassle when they are already very busy.

"It also increases data accuracy and delivers efficiency gains for DIA."

BRO has proved very successful, says Montgomery, so much so that less than two years after its introduction 93% of births in New Zealand are registered online. So impressive is BRO that it won the 2016 Deloitte IPANZ Public Sector Excellence in Digital Government award [see the story in our September issue].

## A smart start

BRO, however, is just the beginning. Expanding upon it, explains Montgomery, is the larger SmartStart programme, which as of December this year will help new parents to digitally organise themselves, from when they find out a baby is on the way, through to the first six months of their child's life.

"The idea is that all the things new parents need to do in this period will be able to be done quickly and easily online: things like keeping track of immunisations, getting benefits assessed (if the child is eligible) and applying for a passport.

"All these different transactions will be brought together in one place, so parents don't have to visit half a dozen different agency websites. It's a bit like Amazon or TradeMe – you visit one website which allows you to do a number of different things while using just one username and password."

SmartStart, says Montgomery, was grounded in partnership with a range of government and NGO organisations including IRD, MSD, MoH, Plunket and the New Zealand College of Midwives. "We also spoke to people at conferences, on marae, in malls, even in knitting groups – the idea was to get as wide a spectrum of input as possible. The suggestions that came back were great. One was for the website to contain a checklist, so that parents can keep track of what's been done and what still needs to be done. Another was to put in a section on post-



natal depression, which is a real problem for some mothers.”

SmartStart itself is merely the first in a series of innovative, customer-centric programmes designed around significant life events that are in the pipeline. These life event initiatives form part of the work plan for the future of the Service Innovation Working Group (a group of tier 2 leaders across the public sector).

“The birth of a child life event was a priority,” says Montgomery. “Next up is the end of life event – what happens when we die and how to make it easier for those who are winding up deceased estates. Other agencies are also working on life events. MSD are leading turning 65 (the retirement life event) and Police are leading becoming a victim of crime. The end of life event is actually quite tricky to design, because it tends to involve private sector organisations like funeral directors, who currently handle a lot of the clerical work around a death.

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“We hope that in time all the main transactions with government which take place across a citizen’s life will be digitised in the way of SmartStart, to everyone’s benefit.”

But wait – isn’t there a danger in all this digital information being collected and collated by government? Are SmartStart and the life event programmes that follow merely steps in the march towards a Big Brother surveillance state?

Montgomery doesn’t think so. “With programmes like SmartStart, we’re not collecting information that we’re not already gathering. Also, it’s important to remember that all this information

is being given with consent – with SmartStart, for example, parents can choose which agencies they want to share information about their child with.

“In the same way, we’re not worried about security. The use of the RealMe will ensure that information can’t be stolen or improperly inputted – there’s little chance of “ghost” children being created for nefarious reasons.”

### Basic questions

Initiatives like SmartStart and the life event programmes that are following it are examples of the new, innovative, highly customer-centric thinking that is increasingly being used in the public sector. Drawing on principles of co-design, services thinking and systems thinking that have long been used in the private sector, more and more government agencies are taking a step back and asking very basic questions like “why do we exist?” and “What are we really here to do?” The answers can be enlightening, pointing the way forward to creating a truly customer-centric service.

“The challenge is that many government agencies have traditionally been focussing on the current state,” says Grant Wallace, whose consultancy firm Assured helps organisations change their thinking about what they do, why they do it, and how they might serve their customers in the future.

“Too often agencies have an unconscious bias to do the wrong things better, instead of doing the right things right. Assured helps agencies stand in their customers’ shoes so they can turn their thinking around and see what needs to be done to become truly customer-centric.”

As an example, Wallace points to the work Assured recently did with Inland Revenue around a ballooning tax debt and overdue returns.

“This was becoming a real problem, with large-scale financial implications. Traditionally, the way to deal with it would have been reactive, transactional and after the event. Matters could escalate quickly through interest and penalties. As a result of the collaborative work we undertook, Inland Revenue has instituted a more customer-driven, friendly, holistic approach, recognising that



**Lillian Grace**  
CEO of Figure.NZ

***Remember the days when if you wanted to know something about a subject you had to go to a library and find an encyclopedia? Now, all you have to do is consult Mr Google. Accessing useful, user-friendly numerical data hasn’t been so easy, however – until now that is. Organisations like Figure.NZ are taking data and presenting it all in vivid, easy-to-understand graphical formats, making it truly customer focused.***

“I founded Figure.NZ in 2012 based on the realisation that everyone is actually capable of using numbers in their thinking, but that it’s been too hard to find and use for most people,” says Lillian Grace, CEO of Figure.NZ. “To truly democratise data, it needs to be published in a place that everyone can find, and in consistent formats

that range from what an expert wants to what those who have never used data before need.

“Our mission is to help everyone make sense of data so they can see New Zealand clearly - we see numbers as a language that holds a lot of stories about our country, people, communities, businesses and environment. We believe that everyone will be able to make better-informed decisions when they are literate in that language.

“We are a registered charity because, similar to Wikipedia, knowledge infrastructure for a country needs to be an independent platform where people - those contributing content and those using it - can trust how it’s been

in most instances people do in fact want to do the right thing about tax.

“It’s about deep customer insight, agility, and taking differentiated approaches recognising different customer needs and circumstances. It’s about making things as simple and easy as possible for taxpayers – making it easy for them and giving them the opportunity to do the right thing.”

Inland Revenue’s new approach has worked. In the past five years tax debt has lessened, more tax returns have been filed, and an extra \$1.47b collected in revenue, money which goes to paying for government services so increasing New Zealand’s social and economic wellbeing.

Inland Revenue’s initiative in this area won it a 2016 Deloitte IPANZ Public Sector Excellence in Improving Public Value through Business Transformation award [see the story in our September issue].

How Inland Revenue dealt with the problem of late tax payments and unfiled tax returns is an example, says Wallace, of the kind of thinking that should be broadly adopted across the public sector. “In my opinion every government service should be tested, not just for efficiency, but for effectiveness and appropriateness. Is this service the right service for the outcomes sought? Is it delivered in the most appropriate way given the customer’s needs, capabilities and circumstances? Is it delivered by the most appropriate service provider?”

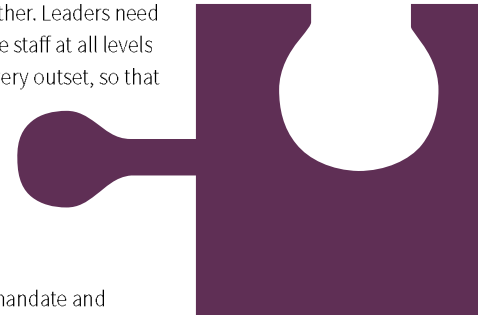
“Public servants need to be asking basic questions like “does this actually still work?” “Is there a better way to solve this problem?” Is there a root-cause-fix such that this service is no longer even required? These questions require thinking at the agency and system level.”

One difficulty, observes Wallace, is that while many leaders in the public service are now advocating for this new, innovative, customer-centric approach, many people at all levels in the organisation don’t know how to go about instituting this change.

“Understanding it and discussing it in an abstract sense is one thing

– actually doing it is another. Leaders need to make sure they involve staff at all levels in discussions from the very outset, so that everyone has a common sense of what needs to be done, and why, and a clear idea of how to get there.

“There needs to be the mandate and commitment (buy-in) for the change. Building change capability within the agencies is critical and typically grossly underestimated. Acknowledging complexity while driving process simplicity with the customer as the organising focus is not easy.”



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### A Step Change

New, innovative, customer-centric thinking lies behind the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment’s Result 9 Accelerator project, which aims to further the goal of making it easy for New Zealanders to do business with government.

“I think it’s fair to say that, in the past, government has been more focused on impacts to its own business outcomes,” says Linda Oliver, Result 9 Manager Strategic Directions at MBIE. “Now, Result 9 focus is about the impact we have on business customers – this is behind everything we do. We’re looking for a step change in the way we offer services, and the Accelerator project is a good example of how we’re succeeding.”

The Result 9 Accelerator was launched in 2015 in partnership with seven other government agencies. Now in its third cycle, it sees up to 10 teams of three to four people from the public and private sectors using lean, start-up methodology to work on projects aimed at removing the “pain points” business customers can experience

treated. Collaboration is at the heart of everything we do, and we partner with government agencies, private sector companies, other NGOs, media and the education sector as the best results come from a cohesive system.”

An example of what Figure.NZ does is seen in their Business Figures product, which helps businesses find data relevant to them without having to know what to search for - with insights into industries, communities and markets, allowing a tradesperson to view simple graphs showing all kinds of relevant information.

Government departments Figure.NZ has worked with include Department of Internal Affairs, Statistics NZ and the Treasury.



when dealing with government.

“The teams start with a ‘rev up’ one weekend,” explains Oliver. “Then there’s a structured process that involves a month of customer research, finding out what exactly is causing the pain and coming up with possible solutions, followed by a month of design and development of the product.

“The last month is spent preparing for Demo Day when the new product is unveiled and pitched to its potential audience. The idea is to set up stand-alone businesses.”

**“We’re looking for new business models. Think of how Uber and Airbnb have revolutionised their industries – that’s the kind of radical thinking we’re interested in.”**

Innovative products the Accelerator teams have come up with in the past include Shoppin, a tool to help retail and hospitality businesses decide if a location will be suitable to set up shop, Vizbot, a web application that will make the building consents process more efficient, and Nexus Marketplace, an online service that will help businesses find government APIs (application program interfaces) which connect computer systems to allow them to share data [for more about these and other Result 9 Accelerator products, see story in our September 2015 issue].

Current Accelerator products include Visard, an application designed to speed up visa applications for Chinese visitors to New Zealand, and 2Shakes, which simplifies the process of obtaining authority to act for bookkeepers.

“The idea is to create something genuinely useful, something that makes a difference,” says Oliver. “We’re looking for new business models. Think of how Uber and Airbnb have revolutionised their industries – that’s the kind of radical thinking we’re interested in.”

SmartStart at DIA, the Result 9 Accelerator at MBIE– these are just two examples of the innovative, customer-centric initiatives that are being developed by government agencies, often in partnership with the private sector and NGOs like Figure.NZ [see inset story]. Whether they herald a genuine, broad-based revolution that will take the public sector beyond the rhetoric of customer focus remains to be seen – as Grant Wallace warned, there remains a gap between what is understood and talked about at the senior level and what may or can be done in an organisation. But there’s no question that change, in this area as in many others, is in the air.



## CONTRIBUTIONS PLEASE

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If you’re working on an interesting project in the public sector or have something relevant to say about a particular issue, think about sending us a short article on the subject. While we will always look at well written pieces on any public sector subject, it would help if your article touched on or related to one of the journal’s quarterly themes.

Themes for 2017 issues are:

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September: Guarding the border

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Contact the editor John O’Leary at [johntoleary@paradise.net.nz](mailto:johntoleary@paradise.net.nz)

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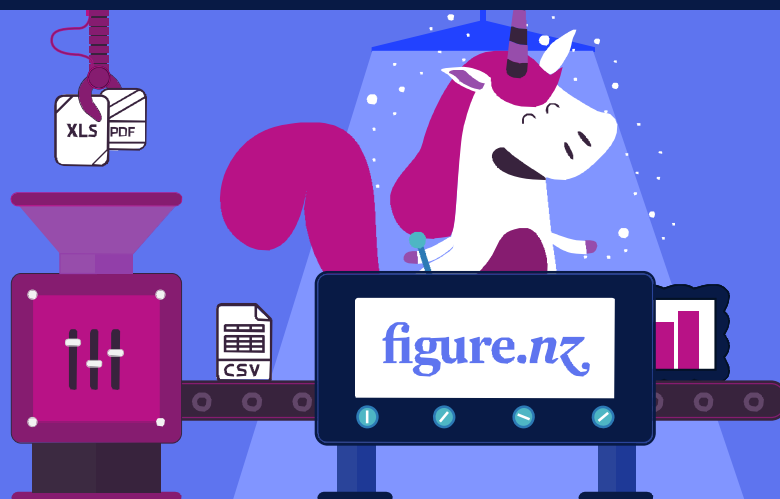


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