

# A fundamental shift – a conversation with Government Chief Information Officer Colin MacDonald



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When he was appointed the government’s ICT supremo two years ago, one newspaper said Government Chief Information Officer and Internal Affairs Chief Executive Colin MacDonald was arguably the public sector’s most powerful mandarin.

In this conversation with ROSE NORTHCOTT, MacDonald discusses the magnitude of the ICT challenge and how success will mean a fundamental shift in the way things are done in the public sector.

**Q: Please explain your dual responsibility as ICT Functional Leader and CE responsible for Result 10.**

They are different but intrinsically linked. Result 10 is about how citizens will experience government services in a digital world. That has to be completely underpinned and supported by technology. There is always an interesting dynamic between technology as underpinning infrastructure and technology as an enabler. The outcome is what’s important. With Result 10 we want to significantly improve the online customer experience so that the citizen is truly at the centre of services the government provides. That is enabled by technology, but also made much easier if that technology itself works well together.

**Q: What needs to change?**

Agencies are currently supporting their own services with technology with a reasonable level of efficiency, in line with the 1980s reforms. But as Productivity Commission Chair Murray Sherwin said recently, the 1980s reforms have run their course – we’ve gone as far as we can with the agency-centric model. We don’t want to throw it away, but we want to augment it by working across the system. The ICT FL makes sure we are leveraging our ICT investment, investing wisely and not investing in 15 copies of the same thing. Ideally we’d do something once and do it well for everyone.

ICT FL then links to Result 10. If all of that big infrastructure and systems are morphed and hang together better, it’s much easier to get them to work in a coherent way to serve citizens better. When we start designing services – starting from the citizen and looking back into government – those agency lines and silos have to break down. That isn’t how people work their lives, and it doesn’t make it easy for citizens to access joined-up government services.

**Q: You want citizen-centric public services based on life events. What does this look like?**

The very first example that we are working on right now is the birth of a child life event. We are creating an integrated service, learning as we go and gaining an understanding of the challenges and the issues we are going to have to knock off to create this service.

When you go through the marvellous experience of one of

your kids coming into the world, you've also got to do the administrative things the government expects of you. You've also got the opportunity to access support services to make the experience better. We are starting to design a service starting from the new parents and their child, and asking what will this service actually look like at that point in somebody's life, and how can we arrange those services in the digital world in a way that makes them easy to access.

That starts by providing basic services like the ability to go online and register the birth, the ability to get an IRD number so the child can get access to KiwiSaver and one or two other reasonably straightforward administrative activities. We will solve the problem of identity using RealMe and give parents the authority to act on behalf of their child in the online world. The next phase will build in additional services; for example, link through to Plunket and health care providers.

Another example is the tertiary education life event. Today that's quite a disjointed process. When we bring the citizen to the fore, you start thinking about those services in quite a different way. You prove who you are once, and then all the other activities around selecting courses, dealing with a student loan and proving eligibility for a course can quickly grow into a useful, integrated service.

#### **Q: What happens next?**

A significant number of these life events happen to us as citizens. We are going to be encouraging agencies to start leading design work to integrate government services around those events.

#### **Q: What will be on stream by 2017?**

This is a radically different approach to the way government services are designed. There is no doubt we will have the birth of a child event service up and running by 2017, but I don't see us as having another 15–20 life events active. That will happen progressively over the next several years. Meanwhile, Result 10 continues to drive up the use of digital channels and make sure people get more and more active in using those channels.

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The 70 percent common services digital by 2017 target is currently unchanged, but we are going to talk to the minister about the creation of integrated services and what some quite different targets might look like.

#### **Q: Why such a radical change to service delivery?**

It's a challenging and ambitious task. But if we don't do it, in my view we will over time begin to lose the confidence and trust of citizens. They expect government services to be tailored in the same way the private sector is now using some of our information to tailor services to our needs.

It's really important we also start to use the information and data that we hold, relating to government services and citizens, in an appropriate and privacy-protected way, unleashing the power of that information to tailor and deliver services in ways that have the biggest positive impact.

This is a long-term change in the way the government delivers services. We mustn't think about it as a project or programme. It is a fundamental shift and we've got a very, very long way to go.

#### **Q: What are some of the key challenges?**

One question I have which is at the heart of this, and we still haven't answered, is that as we create new integrated services, that let's say involve five or six agencies, who has got accountability for the delivery of that service? It does start to challenge elements of the public management model, and it calls for a more sophisticated conversation around accountability.

We will also need CEs and ministers to work hard to balance agency priorities versus system priorities and the trade-offs that requires. In the functional leadership area we've been talking a lot with CEs and teams about those trade-offs with the new approach to services.

#### **Q: You are responsible for monitoring major government ICT projects. How will you prevent another Novopay?**

Events such as Novopay remind us that these endeavours are difficult. My role is, as best as possible, to give ministers a level of assurance that we, collectively across the public sector, are employing good practice and have good governance in place and oversight of the projects, and that the quality assurance is fit for purpose. However, there's nothing surer than that there will continue to be difficulties with ICT projects – that is the nature of projects and the nature of change. This is a world-wide phenomenon that affects the private sector in the same way as the public sector, it's just less visible.

#### **Q: Why were you selected for these roles?**

After gaining a degree in computer science from Glasgow University I worked for many years in the private sector before coming to the public sector in 2002. My experience is split across technology leadership, and operational and support activities in big organisations.

I've worked in customer servicing organisations for a long time and I have a deep professional interest in the things that make services really work for people.

Result 10 is a nice fit for me and so far it's working out well. We've very much acknowledged that it's early days, and there's a long way to go before it's really embedded and we start to drive the transformation we'd like to see.

#### **Q: Was your move into the public sector the right one?**

It was probably the best move I've made! The purpose of work in the public sector is just so important to the country. The intrinsic values the public sector has also sit very comfortably with me at a personal level. The work is challenging, difficult and can be frustrating, but it's really rewarding. ■