



## IxDA Sydney Mentoring Program Podcast

12 – Meera Pankhania

Audio Transcript

**Meera** 00:00

I'm not sure about working in government, you know what, what is how exciting Will it really be? I'm just going to make perhaps a process better or something like that. But actually, it's probably the most challenging environment I've ever worked in.

**Vinita** 01:14

Hey, mira, thanks so much for chatting with us today. It's been awesome to get you on the ISDA mentoring programme podcast.

**Meera** 01:23

Fantastic. Thank you so much for having me as well. It's really great to be here.

**Vinita** 01:27

So a question that we ask all of our guests is what have been some of the highlights and shadows coming out of the pandemic for you?

**Meera** 01:34

Oh, gosh, pandemic seems like I think we're still in the pandemic, aren't we? But the start of the pandemic was absolutely haphazard. For me personally. I was actually working in New South Wales, government. So in the ministry side, so as you can imagine, it was pretty chaotic. I just started I think I was only about a month in. And we had to mobilise teams around trying to work out how do we, how do we work through what the pandemic means for all of us? And yeah, it was, it was pretty crazy. Yeah. Needless to say, and then halfway through the first year or so, I was so exhausted that it was the perfect time, I felt anyway, to just start up a new business crazy thing to do during a pandemic, it's not not necessarily what's on everyone, everyone's minds wedding, their, their full time stable job to go and start something brand new and fresh with with nothing really sort of there to jump into in terms of like consulting or work to jump into straightaway, that it was a very exciting adventure. So I feel like the pandemic definitely had the highs and lows for me. But it came out looking pretty, you know, I would say positive, in terms of starting up a business as well.

**Vinita** 02:45

So that leads us really well into our next question, which is kind of how did you get into government in the civic design space?

**Meera** 02:52

It Good question, then I was actually not necessarily thinking about government. When I first moved to Australia, it's been almost eight years for me, you know, being in Australia, and I was working in a consultancy, and working in a big sort of corporate consultancy, like like PwC, for instance, we were doing a lot of financial sector work. They also did a lot of government sector work as well. And generally, you know, private sector usually is the type of work that you'd get coming through for, for PwC. And then up came, you know, this opportunity to go and work at the Digital Transformation Office at the time. And it was working on a, you know, really interesting, Medicare related exemplar. And on the first instance, I was like, Well, I'm not sure about travelling to Canberra, because I was based in Sydney. So I wasn't too happy about that during the back and forth travel. But it just sounded like a really interesting initiative. And I hadn't really thought about working in government, it's never been sort of overly exciting for me. And I think, after about sort of 10 years, you know, in my career, and like two years into consulting, I was like, well, actually, it's not about time to try something different. And what could go wrong, you know, I leave there hate the travel or I love I love it. And I love sort of working with the team and the different sort of challenges that government presents as well. So in the beginning, it was very, I wouldn't say negative, but quite, not necessarily positive about working for government as well. I think I think I have a perception that government would be quite old school, it would be really difficult to make changes happen. It would be you know, there'd be a lot of resistance to change as well. And, you know, I just felt like the perhaps the maturity of design would be fairly low as well. And so, you know, the challenge wasn't really exciting at the time, like in the beginning, but I definitely changed my mind when I hit the ground and got to meet the teams that I would be working with and Every one was so motivated and pumped, and you could tell that it was generally a very positive team. And everyone wanted to make a difference. And the maturity wasn't super low. So I was definitely surprised, like, by meeting meeting the team that I was going to be working with, especially in Canberra, and the whole sort of Canberra bubble thing, I wasn't sure what I was walking into, basically, and, you know, Australia was still new for me as well. So it was, it was definitely going to be a different and new experience from, you know, working on a lot of private sector work to government. So I was pleasantly surprised. And, yeah, I think I think it was the people that made it, I think it was the the positive nature of the team that I was working with, I had a product manager, delivery managers, you know, other user researchers, interaction designers, and they weren't necessarily used to being in those roles. So when we say product manager, it was actually a director from the public service. And they wouldn't necessarily be doing product manager type of role where they know how to organise a backlog, or you know, how they run a scrum team or something. They didn't necessarily know all of those things, but they had a lot of enthusiasm, and this appetite to learn. And you could see that they just wanted to make a difference and deliver a fantastic service or a product. And so that, for me, was the biggest winner, you know, to join this team that wanted to learn that was open to new ideas, new ways of working new ways of doing design, taking a human centred approach to design as well, rather than just, you know, throwing requirements over the fence to a build team to just go off and build the solution. So yeah, I went in thinking, I'm not sure about government, and how exciting Will this really be to Holy moly, this is going to be really hard. And it's also going to be very exciting, because I've got a bunch of enthusiastic people that want to really make a difference as well.

**Molly Lewis** 07:01

That's awesome that it actually exceeded your initial expectations. And people truly do make a difference. I just wondered how has the maturity of design changed as you've worked in this space?

**Meera 07:13**

Tremendously, actually. So when I joined the the DTO. So after my, my stint working, consulting into government, through PwC, I actually did the worst thing ever, which is leave the consultancy and join the client. And it was just a fantastic opportunity I couldn't pass up and, you know, really started to believe in the mission, which is, you know, how do we make, you know, better services and simply clear faster services for people, and realising that was, you know, real problems as well that I was trying to solve? They're not not sort of working on, you know, how do we get people to take out more credit, for example, but that was that was way back in 2016. So you know, in that time, it's actually matured, in a huge way. And it's been so nice to see those changes along the way as well, I think when the DTO was established, it was there to to, you know, build capability in government and really sort of persuade government to think about different ways of doing, you know, design different ways of actually building services, putting users at the heart of everything that they do as well. And that was quite different for government. And if I had sort of compare a little bit with the UK Government, the maturity was definitely, I would say, slightly lower over here, in comparison to the UK Government. So I think we're starting from a slightly sort of lower level of maturity, not everywhere, though. So I think, you know, there was pockets of really amazing work happening in government, but it wasn't necessarily scalable. People didn't really know about what was happening over there. So there were a couple of departments that were doing phenomenal work there. Whereas I think through the DTO, what they were trying to do was trying to raise that maturity with everyone at the same sort of time, by doing a whole bunch of exemplars. So, you know, a department would come along to DTO and say, hey, you know, this is a, an opportunity for us to perhaps, change the way the service actually works. And often the DTO we're going to the department where there was an opportunity to transform digital services, or non digital even. So, you know, during that time, I think everyone went from this baseline understanding of what good design looks like to actually we're doing that and then some more now. And so, you know, more recently, I've been a little bit sort of, you know, in and out of government, especially federal government, but during that time, it's, it's, it's definitely sort of grown and you can see that you're not talking about sort of putting users at the heart of things anymore. You're talking about, okay, how do we get better engagement with users throughout the process? So throughout, you know, the service design, delivery sort of process of doing things, or whatever, you know, initiative you're trying to achieve or outcome that you're trying to achieve. So it's really nice, you know, whether it's a policy design piece, or whether it's a framework that you're trying to design, or whether it's an actual product or service or a tiny sort of feature, whatever it may be, the narrative has shifted a little bit, you know, more than what I'd seen in the in the early days. And it's really nice to see that maturity there and people talking more and more about, you know, what's the problem that we're trying to solve? You know, who are the users? And what have they said about this, and I hope it's not just focus groups that we've done. And it's actually, you know, usability testing, as well as some exploratory type of research that we've been doing. So there's definitely a bit more maturity around the conversation, and definitely a bit more maturity around the types of research and design work that you would be doing.

**Molly Lewis 10:57**

Yeah, that's awesome to hear that it's grown as you've been working in that space. I did wonder if you think the public sector is for every designer, or that designers should, you know, try work in that space?

**Meera 11:11**

Yeah, definitely. I like, like I said, Before, I was pleasantly surprised. And I imagine there's a lot of people out there who are probably thinking, I'm not sure about working in government, you know, what, what is, you know, how exciting Will it really be, I'm just going to make perhaps a process better or something like that, but actually, it's probably the most challenging environment I've ever worked in. And, and that's largely because of some of the systemic issues and, you know, governance related things, policy related things that sort of sit in the way of, you know, designing services that, you know, fully meet users expectations, and you know, what the full potential of that service can be. So sometimes, you know, policy can be a bit of a blocker there. But that's where you can convert that thinking into a bit of a challenge as well. And say to yourself, Okay, how might we actually shift this policy to make these services better and a little bit more user friendly, but by also meeting policy needs as well, and challenging policies. So I feel like it's part of any design practitioners responsibility to try and sort of challenge you know, what good design can be, and, and that it's the same within the public sector as well. So you know, a lot of good design can be hindered by, you know, bad policy, or just policy that hasn't evolved, or policy makers who didn't realise how their words are actually going to impact you know, how an end user interacts with the product or service as well. So I would say that it's a very exciting environment to be in, it can be as fast paced or slow paced, as you know, the department or the government agency that you ended up working with is going, I would definitely say that it's very fulfilling as well. So I think I, having sort of worked in the in the private sector, for majority of my career, I mean, I've only been really working as a public servant, and then working or consulting into government for about five ish years. So it's not really that long, perhaps a little bit longer. Now, now that, you know, started the business and, and we've been consulting into government as well. But that's not a very long time. But it definitely kept me interested. And I've worked on some really interesting things, including more recently, like, doing some policy design type of work as well and talking to policymakers about, you know, how they can think of these these policies in a different perspective in a different way. So it's definitely for people that want to try out something new, want an interesting challenge, if they're tired of designing things that are, I'd say, fairly, I wouldn't say simple that if you if you're keen to try out something that has a lot of systemic issues, something that has deep sort of infrastructure that you know, where it's not as simple as, let me just design a screen that will connect to this API. And this is, you know, hey, presto, this is what it's going to become. We're talking about brokering conversations with different stakeholders that have very different perspectives. We're talking about having conversations with different departments about the thing that connects into, you know, their service, so different multiple government services that interconnect. We're talking about doing, getting getting people to think about government services from a user lens. Like, you know, I mentioned earlier that, that although the narrative has shifted, there's different parts of a department that will think about the user lens in an entirely different way. So for them, the user user can be themselves. So I'm a user. I'm just going to use this and then I can tell you that this is working and not working. So it's really getting everyone to think differently. And so yeah, if you fancy a a different challenge and doing something that is I would say really hard, but really pushing your limits as a designer, then government's definitely the place for that.

**Vinita 15:06**

That's really great to hear. And I want to kind of talk on one of the threads of something you said around how design can influence policy. And I can say maybe influence change, and vice versa, and kind of

how every department has a different lens that they bring. So that might be from a policy perspective, as an example, could you give us some examples of that happening? Because I think, as designers, we have our design hat on, right. So we can't quite see it from that other perspective. So we'd love to hear some examples that you can share with us.

**Meera** 15:37

Yeah, so while I was at the DTA, so the Digital Transformation Office, eventually became an agency. And so while I was over at the DTA, I got to work on digital identity. And that was a wonderful experience, because a lot of the policy was in the works. When I first started, and it was at the earliest stages, they're just finished off a discovery piece, and they've done a fair bit of time in exploratory type of research. And then, you know, we were transitioning into the Alpha team. So you know, making sure that we've really understood the problem space. And then, you know, they had a, we sort of do a bunch of concept testing to build out some prototypes. Basically, at the time, I got to work with a couple of policymakers who very experienced very advanced in their sort of knowledge and understanding about identity and legislation around identity in Australia and globally, as well. And so they were writing this, this framework, so the trusted digital identity framework, and, you know, it was so nice to be part of it from the early days. So they're off writing a bunch of identity related policy, but what we didn't have was a product to actually test whether the policy was going to be working or not. And so there are a bunch of knowns, when it comes to public policy, there's a bunch of things that are the non negotiables. So we can take those non negotiables and start sort of prototyping something to see whether it actually works. So we're talking about things like authentication. So how do you you know, put your username and password into form fields? And what does it mean to have the right type of username and password as well does it need to be a an email address, or you know, made up username, there's a password need to be, you know, anything in particular, as well. So these are the types of things that goes into a policy or a framework like that. And an often, you know, it's taken on existing patterns, and you can reshape them as you're building out the product that meets this policy. So for a little while, we actually had the policy feeding product, so influencing what the product would end up being. So if we think about a verification product, like where you're putting your identity related documents into, you know, a system, and it's going to verify that you are who you say you are. And it's verifying it from sort of existing government documents, sources as well. So for a little while, you know, policy was able to influence the product, but we got to a point where we sort of fleshed out this product in a in a prototype sense. And we started testing it with users and realised that actually, us aren't able to use this product in its true form, based on the existing policy and the way that policy was being written. And so we started to share this back with the policy team. So we made sure that the policy team was part of our multidisciplinary team and sharing that back with them, it was either received really, really well or it wasn't because it was like, Well, this is what the policy says, we can actually shift this, that we managed to push, push quite hard for that change those types of changes, because they could see what the impact was, you know, the impact that it was having on end users when we were either having conversations with end users, showing them some concepts that they would provide some feedback on, or through usability testing. And it was remarkable to see that sort of shift in realisation that, hey, what we're writing, what we're putting into this policy and framework is not going to be it's not really going to work. Part of that sort of progress actually managed to get these policymakers to, to prototype as well and sketch and that's a brand new concept for policy makers. So we're talking about people who typically be in front of their computer writing, government policy, but I remember sort of turning up the first time in in Canberra,

and I booked out this really big boardroom and brought some post it notes and Sharpies in there. And policymakers turned up with their with their laptops, and I said, Okay, we're not going to leave me laptops, but you know, really need us to sketch out some ideas around what a login page is going to look like, for example, and they said, Oh, yeah, buddy. He needs to be this needs to be that and it needs to have this many characters and you know, we need to make sure and I'm like, Okay, well, no, that's fine. I want you to forget everything that you know, and really sort of think about if in the ideal world, how would you how might you actually design what the perfect authentication experience could look like. So let's, let's just get some ideas. So half the team was actually based in Sydney. So we set up a video link and sketched at the same time. So they say it wasn't this special thing that we were doing with policy, but we're all doing it together. So I realised actually taking policymakers on that journey with you to design better products and services for end users was definitely the way forward. So then I turned up the following week did the same thing, they eventually got used to it, I think the by the third or fourth time, they were in the room ready to go, no laptops, with their sharpies in the hands. So they knew what what to expect. And they knew we were going to be sketching, you know, same time, same place, same room, consistency is really, really important, we've managed to make a whole bunch of changes based on what we thought was going to be very difficult. So things like consent, you know, we realise actually, we can design the content in a slightly different way. Because it's not user friendly, as it is the way it was written in the policy itself. So we managed to do a lot of little things that makes a big difference for end users and how they sort of provide informed consent. And so through that we made content changes, we made product sort of changes, like future changes, we made a lot of progress in like priorities as well. So how we might sort of have people with, with a vision impairment, able to use an identity service like this. So the priority at the time was anyone that has a passport or a driver's licence, to use, you know, the identity verification service, because they needed a photo ID. Of course, someone with a vision impairment may not have a passport. I mean, a lot of people don't have passports in Australia anyway. But they certainly wouldn't have a driver's licence. So they do have a visual impairment card with their photo ID on there. So the way, you know, we prioritise which identity documents would be available for people to use came from, you know, a policymaker sitting through a usability testing session, initially just observing from the corner, and then eventually, you know, wanting to wanting to participate as well. So you can be really powerful taking policymakers on that journey with you, when you're designing, you know, products and services for for end users, you know, like for governance services, anyway.

**Vinita 22:41**

Yeah, it's pretty remarkable the journey that you described, I think, similarly, working in aviation that may have more traditional ways of working in mindset, it, it's, it's quite amazing to kind of take them on that journey and make that progress. And so kind of to that point, as you've worked with different departments, what are some of the similarities and differences you've seen in the way that they're actually approaching design?

**Meera 23:07**

That's a that's a really good question. I think, I think that baseline understanding of what good design could be your processes could be, is definitely there across the board, I think, you know, in terms of maturity wise, I feel like everyone has stepped up. Even the smallest government department or agency has really stepped up as well over the last five, five or so five or so years that I've been sort of

tracking the progress in government. I would say state governments are doing some remarkable work as well, in comparison to, to federal government. And I think that's because, you know, the reaches, I mean, users are a lot closer. So people using state based services, you're a lot closer to them to make a difference as well. But in comparison, I would say like from between government, different government departments, I think it comes down to how early they think about doing design. So a lot of like, the baseline wise, a lot of departments are doing design further down the line. So they've got requirements already. They've got a good understanding based on, you know, basic sort of policy related, and legislation related the, I guess, like mandates and so forth, they've got a good understanding of what needs to be designed and and so they're doing it a lot later down the line. So someone may have already started putting visuals together, someone may have already started putting, you know, the the actual build of the product or service, you know, or features together, and they're doing some usability testing off the back of it and based on any feedback, they'll release the product and service. So you know, it's the just in time approach, which happens a lot later down the line. However, I think the difference that I've Seeing especially you know where I'm I'm working at the moment and you know, a couple of my my team members as well is how do we sort of incorporate the design mindset much earlier on in that sort of early stages of getting funding to do something in the first instance. So this is before gone to government and said, Hey, I need X amount of millions of dollars to go off and do this amazing thing over here? How might we do some design thinking or run a few design sprints? Or do some some of that design work much, much earlier on? So what you're then also designing is the capability profile that needs to come together to actually deliver a set outcome? You know, what, how long will that process actually take as well to deliver? So all of these considerations can be made much, much earlier on? So how do you go broad? So how do you go wide and as deep as needed over a short space of time to produce a, I guess, like a, a new policy idea, or new product idea or a new feature, whatever it may be, before you actually seek funding, and then realise that you need to do more exploratory work, or you need to do more research, more design work, I think typically, what happens in government is that funding is already allocated, and you receive the funding, and you realise that it's going to take a lot longer to build the thing. And so most of the money is allocated to most of the budgets allocated to just building rather than doing design research, and really understanding the problem. And, you know, understanding how we might actually, you know, develop an idea further, to ensure that it's making its meeting, you know, end user needs. And so, if we do this much, much earlier on, we're almost accepting that we don't have a full sort of understanding of what the problem is that we're trying to solve. We don't really know that much about it, we only have basic information based on any any qual or quant data that we may have available to us. So how do we influence the pre approval stages of government service and delivering government services. And that's really challenging, because typically, you know, policymakers or business part of a government department don't necessarily think we should do some some of that design work much earlier on. And so they typically sort of go, Hey, here's a great idea. And we should go and develop this idea. And let's just go and seek funding for it. And they get a little bit of input from lots of different parts of the organ, a part of the department to get some idea of, you know, how long this might take to build. But what people don't necessarily factor in is really understanding what the user needs are, and doing, you know, some of that further exploratory type of work. So I think that's where seen probably the the the biggest differences, there's some departments doing a lot of that work, which is fantastic to see. Other departments not so much. It's very, it's very new to new concepts. But I think the potential is definitely

there for more and more organisations to look at it from that point of view. And I think that comes down to vision, appetite, willingness to try something different. And it really does come from the top.

**Vinita 28:20**

Yeah, I really like that concept about research before research. And I think it becomes even more important in government, I think, in the private sector, maybe there's more funding that can potentially be put towards that. But that sounds like a real challenge. Maybe more specific to government were more appointed in the civic design space, for sure.

**Meera 28:42**

Yeah, that's right. And, you know, through through propel, we've been really pushing hard on those things. I mean, slightly, sort of, you know, personal bias there, having worked in New South Wales ministry and, and that to, for, for a minister who's very pro in making products and services, user friendly, and, and digital first, and really sort of, you know, pushing the boundaries. So, you know, got to see some of that shift happening from internally from New South Wales Government. And so, you know, seeing that in action, and then, you know, thinking about my previous time working in government, how perhaps I could have changed some of that language to work with more policymakers much, much earlier on, has definitely guided you know, how I approach working with some of the clients that I'm working with, and, you know, who we're working with as propellers as well. And so, you know, our approach is very much a, you know, we were here to sort of help you work on those sticky problems. And, you know, how do we do things in a different way? How do we do things more strategically? How do we get that alignment? And so I think, you know, when if you're designing, you know, the government services or whatever impact or change you're trying to make from much earlier on, you can actually get really good traceability right to the end product as well because you're putting the right measures of success in place as well.

**Vinita 30:03**

Can you actually talk a little bit about traceability? Because I know it's something we've talked about previously. But I think from a design perspective, it's, it's quite a concept to take home, especially because I know one of the themes in our podcast series has been around business and finding business value and design. And obviously, traceability is quite related to that.

**Meera 30:24**

Yeah, absolutely. So traceability is so important to have, and I think, in government, especially, because at the end of the day, the money that we're using, or the the budget that's allocated, is taxpayers dollars. And so from that point of view, there's, there's even more responsibility to make sure that we are, you know, designing and building products and services the right way, for the, you know, right cohorts of people and making sure that they actually meet everyone's everyone's needs, it's not, you know, I'm not going to be that person who says it's not just about to end users, but you know, it is also about the organisation, and it is about, you know, policies, it is about governance, and, you know, all of these things are very, very important. It's not just about, you know, the end user, you've got to be able to defend that you're working on. And it's interesting actually is even, you know, if you're working in a team, you want to feel as though that the thing that you're working on has some impact, or will make a difference. And so you know, the thing that you're working on usually comes off of a backlog or a

product roadmap or that's typically, you know, aligned to a vision, it's aligned to a strategy, it's aligned to, you know, a broader vision, perhaps it's aligned to, you know, more strategies, depending on the different layers of government that you might be dealing with, or any organisation for that matter. But the most important thing is that the thing that you're working on, there is some line of sight there, right to the very top. So where has this actually come from, you know, where does it sort of originate from? And so how do we maintain that traceability when you're working on this tiny thing over here delivering, you know, let's say a feature? Or how do we know that that feature is successful in meeting the vision, the overall vision or the overall strategy, and it's so challenging to do when, once you've received funding in government, because what happens is, typically, anyway, what happens is, department will go seek funding, and it will be outcome from based on outcome, there'll be a lot of detail that goes into it. But it's really challenging, because how much information can you provide to say, this is the thing, this is how we're going to build the thing, this is what it's going to look like, this is how it's going to interact. And only to sort of realise when you're working on the thing that you need to build it or design it in a different way. And the experience is going to be entirely different, because you're learning about it as you go. Provided that you're you're not taking a waterfall sort of method to delivery. And doing somewhat some agile in between as well, although there's lots of different versions of that mouse. So it becomes even more challenging, but provided you're trying to understand, incrementally understand what the user needs are and how the product or service that you're trying to make is going to change while you're you know, forming and understanding basically, it's really hard to maintain that traceability because you're saying to government, this is what we're going to do. And then you end up designing or releasing a product or service that is slightly different. And so there's no silver bullet for this, the only thing that you can do is try and influence much earlier on and really focus on the outcomes. So if the outcome is something like, you know, we want users to be able to interact with this service in the, you know, in the easiest possible way, so that they can complete their job profile and search for more jobs immediately. So we're not asking them to spend too long, filling out 20 Different forms or something like that. I mean, even that's quite specific. So how do we sort of go from being too specific to something that's a little bit more higher level, but more outcomes focused. And that then provides everyone with a little bit more room to go off and, you know, design and build a product that really does meet user needs, while fulfilling a set outcome that you've promised to government? And I think that's where the real challenge is, how do we go from a specification that we're going to go off and build and design this thing, not sort of be too focused on meeting the exact specification in there. So I think from a traceability going back to you know, to traceability, it's slightly easier to do that traceability piece, it's not great to do it retrospectively. So we've tried to do it retrospectively, it's very hard to do. So we've got, I think we end up with a particular client, we ended up having product roadmaps and features defined and we had to trace that back to the original business case, and original research and blueprints and design work that had been done. And we were trying to sort of combine all of those worlds together. And it ended up being this massive monolith of a, an artefact, which then had all of these different things like it was almost like a crime board, you know, on a wall with the string, you know, kind of attached to one thing to another thing, and, and it was really hard to do, but the sole purpose of doing and that to retrospectively was to make sure that we haven't missed anything, it was to make sure that there weren't any gaps in our understanding. So we had all these features forming. And, you know, these product teams are off defining some of these features. But had we really understood what this feature is. And part of like, my role with this client was to help them understand what those gaps are, understand, where there are opportunities to do more design more research, or not do too much as

well. And I think that's another prickly sort of topic, you know, how much how much research and design work should you do, to progress something along, and I think, you know, in this environment, especially in government, there are challenges around that. So that traceability piece that we did actually help with, hey, team, you need to do a little bit more discovery type of research, you need to do a little bit more alpha type of design and research. Rather than spending too long on this, you probably don't need to spend that much time, you need to spend a bit more time doing this other thing over here. So the traceability piece actually helped us to navigate how much designing research delivery teams needed to do versus not needing to do. But also to make sure that there were there weren't any gaps in the underplanting as well. The last thing we want is, you know, delivering a delivering a service. And then it's entirely different to what we promised.

**Vinita 37:24**

I think it's a really important balance between what sounds like kind of zooming in and zooming out balancing, uncertainty and still delivering as well as the business case, as well as having traceability to make sure that you're delivering on what was asked. It's a lot of different things to balance together in public sector, where I think there's a little bit more scrutiny on how things are delivered and where they're delivered. And under what timeline as well. So massive props for chat, explaining and helping us understand a very complicated domain space.

**Molly Lewis 38:04**

Awesome, so Meera, a question we ask all our guests on my podcast. Since it is a mentoring programme podcasts, we'd like to know what mentoring means to you.

**Meera 38:15**

So mentoring, for me, personally, is having someone to connect with that has a different perspective to my own. And to be able to have lots of good healthy conversations about some of the things that perhaps you're trying to learn. So in my case, I still have mentors over in the UK, but I still connect with and it's really funny because we still have mentoring type of conversations. And we still in in the calendar, it still says mentoring catch up with mirror, you know. But I'm, like one of my mentors said to me more recently, I'm learning more from you, are you even getting anything out of this anymore? And I said, Actually, yeah, I am. So for me, it's become more of a networking opportunity to have conversations about things that I'm still exploring. And I think it's always good to have that learning mindset. And I don't think that you can ever really get to a point where you don't need a mentor. And so, in no matter how mature you are in your career, or new you are in your career, there's always an opportunity to learn. So mentoring is a really great way of just connecting with people that and you can have multiple mentors, right, I've got so many different sort of levels of mentors. And we have lots of different types of conversations. And it's so nice to have that safe space to have those conversations and to not feel judged, you know, to about some of the crazy moments that you might be dealing with or the people that you deal with. And you know, it's really nice to to be able to connect with someone that perhaps has a little bit more experienced than you or just a different perspective entirely.

**Molly Lewis 40:00**

Yeah, that's such a good point. And I love how you've, you know, stay connected with Mentees and mentors along the way. I did wonder how maybe mentoring, the design differs between consultancy that you're working previously and government or civic space?

**Meera 40:20**

Yeah, sure. Um, so I think like mentoring in government or in the, you know, in the public space, is quite challenging, I would say, because, unless you have a network that you're part of, or so when I was over at the DTA, we had set up communities of practice. And so that was a really great way of different practitioners meeting each other in government. And we would send out newsletters, we would have training sessions or meetups and things like that, that got government practitioners, you know, together. And it was a great way of people meeting each other, and then going off having, you know, they'll either maintain those relationships or come together again, when something else was held again. So it wasn't like a formal sort of mentoring relationships that people had formed. But I think, you know, for me, personally, I ended up meeting a lot of people along the way through those types of networking and those in those engagements that we had through the DTA. And quite a few of them, actually, I'm still in touch with who were they contacted me and said, you know, love to carry on having these conversations, and it'd be great to just grab a coffee with you every few weeks. Or it'd be great to just jump on a call or something like that, especially during, you know, the the pandemic where, you know, you weren't interacting face to face with a lot of people and there weren't enough events and things going on, or they become online. And there's nothing wrong with that, if anything, it sort of opened it up to more people, but it made it challenging to just have side conversations, it made it challenging to pick point a person and sort of have a quick chat with them. And on a line that's harder to do. And so, yeah, it's definitely, it's definitely different the way the government like in the in the public sector space, how mentoring actually happens, I don't think that there's anything formal there anymore. From my understanding, I know the Australian Public Service Commission, CPSC, they do a lot of training, mentoring, you know, we recently did a a taster course, of a user research session that we held with them more recently, but then through that we actually had a fair bit of inquiries around Hey, can you tailor some of some training for us. And so, you know, we're working on a lot of, you know, different sort of training, types of services, including coaching and mentoring. And it's interesting that it doesn't come to, you know, people's mind immediately that perhaps I can tap into a person or a consultancy, that cares about building capabilities, especially in government, like we do, perhaps we can buy some of their time, or perhaps we can get them in for, you know, a short period periodically, to run a session with us or to just guide us and or tap into just a conversation that you can have. So it's definitely new, I would say in government, from my understanding, at the very least, you know, it's something that we've been researching a fair bit to see how we can help more people in government. But, you know, when I compared to the private sector, there's definitely more opportunities available there. I think people are a little bit more aware that they can do more of this. And, you know, they go to a lot of meetups and, you know, things like US, Australia, I IxDA is fantastic for this, right. This is how when I first came to Australia, I think the first event that I went to was an eye IxDA event in Sydney. And so, you know, that helped me to meet a lot of people and to also maintain some of that connection with them and continue talking to them. So you can either formalise it or keep it informal. It just depends on on your appetite. And I think when it's something a bit more formal, it's there in the calendar and you turn up and you have you know, things to cover. And you can put more structure in place of course, you know, some of them for me have turned have gone from formal to informal. And I really love those

because they become a quick conversation on the phone or a quick sort of text message exchanges and things like that and, but I still refer to them as my mentor or my mentee. And and that's quite nice as well to remember that you are still learning from each other.

**Vinita 44:56**

So speaking about mentoring, especially In this, I know you've mentioned before that recruiting designers in the public sector space is quite difficult as well. What are some of the weather skill sets? Or mindsets or tool sets that you think that the next generation of designers need? And how does a young designer break into this space? Because I think at least personally, I've had the perspective that, oh, you need a little bit of experience, if not a lot of experience to jump into this domain space. But I know, it's opening up and curious to hear your thoughts there.

**Meera 45:35**

Yeah, definitely. I would say, from a mindset perspective, just have an open mind. I think, you know, be curious, have an open mind. You know, put aside your, your biases, and, you know, and even the ego, right, like, I think I, when I first entered the world of government, yeah, had a bit more of an ego about, you know, you know, what do they know about designing good services? And, you know, how is this really going to work, that sort of thing. And a lot of people do think that they think that actually, government is not a exciting place to be. But actually it is. And there's, it just depends on the challenge that you want. And I think so from a mindset point of view, just keep an open mind, for sure. I think, and be curious, I think the curiosity part is really important, and really sort of, you know, be humble in that environment. Because I think it's really important that, as designers that we maintain a really good relationship, whether we're working directly in government as a public servant, or, or as a consultancy, going into public service, right? It's our responsibility to build good relationships and take the public service on that journey, whether you're in house or as a consultant. And the reason why I say that is that, you know, you've got to think about the next runner in all of this, like, you're in there doing a job, you're, you're in there, trying to build that relationship between traditional sort of, you know, public servants, with what this new thing is design, research, human centred design, you know, contemporary ways of working, all of that is very new to some people. And so if you leave, if you leave them feeling that they don't know what they're doing, and you make them feel like they're there. I guess like lower level of maturity, if you make them feel like they don't know, and you're better than them in any way, then obviously, they will have this negative feeling towards people like us, who are, you know, just practitioners, design practitioners, researchers, practitioners that just want to do a really good job in, you know, overall sort of user experience, space. And that's really tough. When you're trying to take, you know, public service on that journey, like to leave your ego at the door. Be curious, be open minded about, I think, from a tool set point of view, just bring your whole self I think, you know, the tool sets, obviously, you know, you have the tools, you know, which tool to pull out of the toolkit as and when needed. And I think you know, that that's a an ongoing learning journey, as well. So there's always going to be the baseline stuff that you know, that, yes, I need to do this type of research here, I need to do this type of design over here. But I think it's how you do it, it's in your presence, and how you do it with the public service and how you sort of approach the problem that you're trying to solve as well. And not go in sort of gung ho, presuming that everyone knows everything that you're talking about. So perhaps adopts the assembler language. So rather than saying user research, I tend to use a lot more of, you know, we're doing some evidence gathering here. And we're trying to build our confidence about

this thing that we're, we think we need to build? How do we maintain good level of confidence about this? Do we need to go and learn some more? Okay, let's go along, learn some more, rather than saying, you know, we're going to do lots and lots of user research. Because, again, you know, a lot of government departments feel like our consultancies come in, and they do lots of user research, and they leave us with, you know, lots of insights and findings, but real, no real action, what to do next. And so, you know, how do we change that language? How do we do sort of how do we take everyone on that journey? Those are the types of things that government would be looking for different departments would be looking for, from new people coming into the government space and, and yes, you know, it's really challenging to attract talent into government as well. So having been a public servant, for quite a few years and, you know, doing a lot of recruitment and hiring is really challenging to find. Find people that want to work Want that challenge as well and want to join the public service, whether it's as a public servant, or as a, you know, a temporary workforce in like a contractor or a consultant as well. So he I'm not entirely sure why that is, you know, more recently I've been we've been doing a lot of recruitment not for just ourselves at propel, but you know, with some of the government departments that we're working with, and it's so hard to find good people. And, you know, when I say good people, I don't mean I came looking for someone who's super friendly and you know, has a great sort of, you know, profile or CV or they've worked here done this these courses or anything like that. It's really around that sort of curious mindset and that willingness to try something new and it's that desire to really make a difference. I think if you work in government or work in public service, you're not there to make lots of money as such, you're you're there because you're wanting to make a difference. And you really want to design good human experiences for for users and humanise government services. People don't use government services because they, you know, want to they do it because it's a means to an end. And so how do we how do we make these services better? And so you've got to have that desire to really make a difference.

**Sam Hancock** 51:27

And that concludes our latest episode for the Sydney IX da pod. If you want to learn more about IX da Sydney's events and mentorship programmes, please feel free to visit IX da sydney.org Cheers See you next time.

**Meera** 51:53

Hi, I'm Mira pan Carnia and you've been listening to I lxDa Sydney mentoring programme podcast.