

Data

Lost children of the digital revolution

Marie Johnson

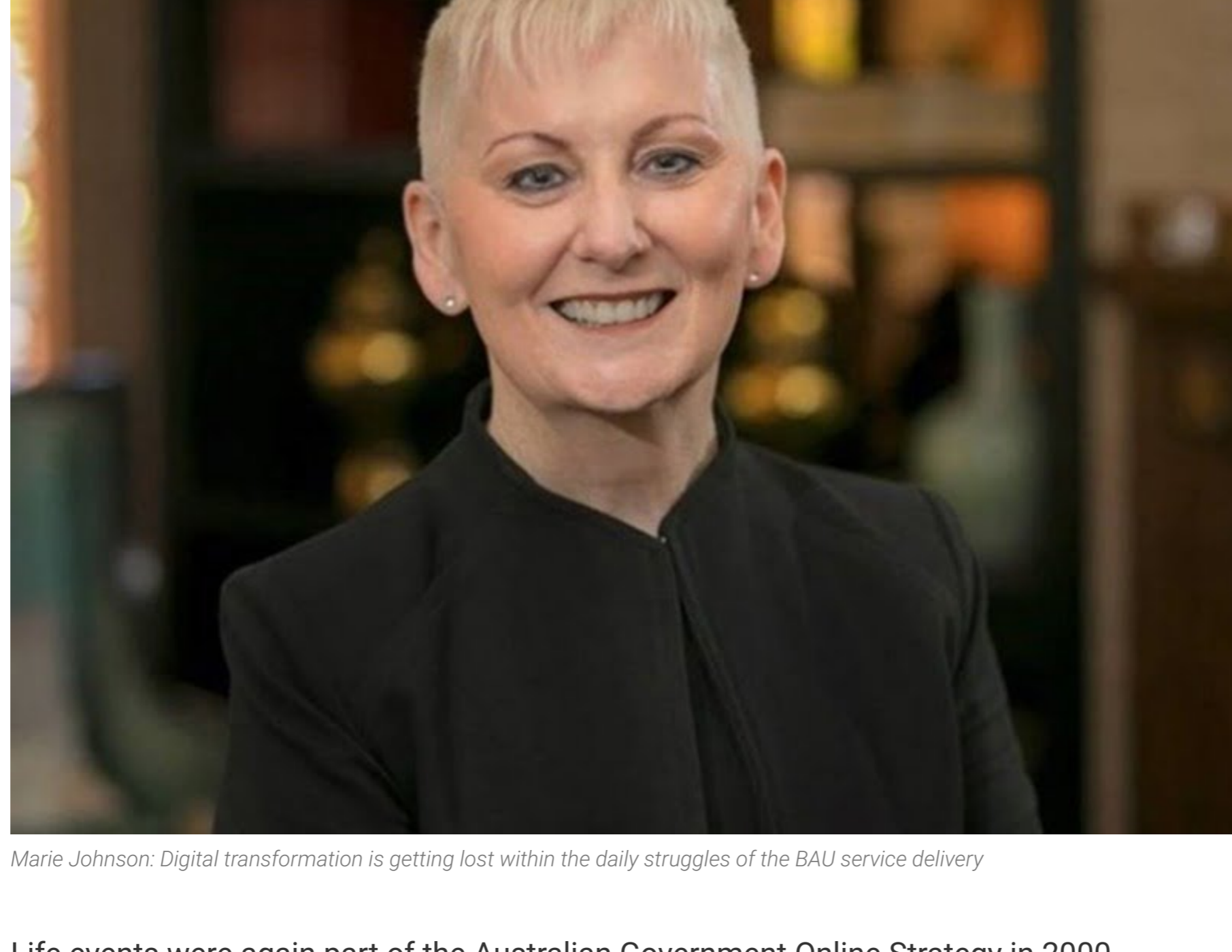
Contributor
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In 2008 – the year that the first round of “Service Delivery Reform” was getting underway – my daughter had her first baby. The bureaucracy would come to call this ‘a life event’.

At the time, I was the Chief Technology Architect of the Department of Human Services, responsible for overseeing the technology business cases and architecture bringing together Centrelink, Medicare Australia and the Child Support Agency, as part of Service Delivery Reform.

Life events would become a strategy of Service Delivery Reform – adopted from “life events strategies” from years past.

Victoria was leading the world in 1998 with “life events” as part of the Victoria21 strategy. In 2000, the UK GovOnline strategy spoke about “life episodes.”



Marie Johnson: Digital transformation is getting lost within the daily struggles of the BAU service delivery

Life events were again part of the Australian Government Online Strategy in 2000.

And again in 2008, Service Delivery Reform gave birth to “life events”.

The real life-event “birth of a baby” experience of my daughter (and most other mothers), looked nothing like the bureaucratically work-shopped version.

The midwife and my son-in-law had to fill in the Centrelink form in the delivery room, to certify a live birth while my daughter, having just given birth, waited. At home, calls to the Centrelink call centre went unanswered, the website impossible to navigate, online forms led to further cycles of calls to the call centre. All while a new baby cried in the arms of an exhausted new mother.

Some people reading this will remember that I challenged (and still challenge) the theoretical notion of life events – a process mapping approach devoid of the human experience. I challenged the meaningless performance statistics.

And still today, service design happens without co-design: no wonder the systems supporting service delivery are so problematic.

My daughter became a real-life case study: the hypothetical persona “Jane, the new mother”.

That baby, my grandson, goes to high school next year. In two electoral cycles, he will be voting.

To understand if the period we are in is in fact real transformation – or transformation marketing – we need to look back and look forward.

Can someone please explain why life events, including the “birth of a baby” are yet again part of the Australian Government’s Digital Government 2025 strategy?

In 2025, my grandson will be 17.

The “digital transformation” efforts of government have utterly failed my grandson(s) generation.

What has transformed their lives and ability to communicate and flourish is the Apple ecosystem and other gaming and virtual world platforms – but that is a story for another day.

I have long been an outspoken advocate for a forward-leaning inclusive digital transformation agenda, anchored in co-design.

In my submission to the [Murray Financial Systems Inquiry](#), I advocated for a “Digital Transformation Commission” similar to “reconstruction commissions” set up following man-made or natural disasters. I also advocated for a federated digital identity strategy, which the Financial Systems Inquiry acknowledged and recommended.

This is not about business as usual (BAU) or an agency-by-agency approach.

Malcolm Turnbull created the Digital Transformation Office – not a ‘Commission’. The problem with an ‘Office’ – like the ‘Office of the Access Card’ – is that it lacks independence, authority and is subject to reassignment. An ‘Office’ has no longevity.

After Turnbull, the government really did not know where to put the DTO/DTA or what its purpose really was. The hot-potato, problem child now heavily courted by consultants.

Stuck within the bowels of service delivery is exactly where it *should not* be. I know service delivery intimately and the excruciating pressure of front line delivery.

There are technical and administrative reasons why ‘transformation units’ should not be within BAU and why they do not succeed within BAU structures.

Large organisations, starting in manufacturing but quickly spreading to service delivery, have always tried to eliminate variation through disciplines such as Six Sigma. These are big machines and variation reduces quality, transparency and increases costs.

This is not to say that there should not be a drive for continuous improvement – there must be continuous improvements in BAU – this is essential, but it is not transformation. Transformation fundamentally changes things.

The DTA sits inside one of the biggest service delivery machines in the APS and more broadly Australia – Services Australia. Unlike the equally economically significant ATO, Services Australia is the product of regular machinery-of-government (MOG) changes, name changes and rebranding – so any “transformation” momentum gets overtaken not only by BAU but by MOG.

Over time large organisations develop a monoculture where “antibodies” seek to destroy variation in all its forms.

These antibodies can include management indifference, executive hostility, lack of resources, plain ignorance, and even that bureaucratic constant, red-tape. Risk aversion and lack of imagination hold the future to ransom.

The Australian Government “digital transformation” activities within these administrative arrangements have become a re-hash of past concepts variously related to MyGov, portals, life events, procurement processes all suffocated by the operational pressures of business as usual.

This is part of the reason why “life events” has not succeeded in multiple attempts over the past 20 years. It is also a big part of the reason why the confusion of digital identity efforts – MyGov, MyGovID, GovPass – have not only stalled, but are effectively ungovernable.

And it’s not ok that \$200 million has been sunk into GovPass just to get to beta.

How does any of this serve any citizen, the most vulnerable or young people (like my grandson) who will inherit this mess?

In 2014, I co-wrote a paper with Dr Jerry Fishenden from the UK [“A Tale of Two Countries: the Digital Disruption of Government”](#) which compared the digital transformation efforts of the UK and Australia over twenty years – with confronting findings.

“...an estimated US\$3 trillion was spent during the first decade of the 21st century on government information systems. Yet 60 per cent to 80 per cent of “e-government” projects have failed in some way, leading to “a massive wastage of financial, human and political resources, and an inability to deliver the potential benefits of e-government to its beneficiaries”.

But we do know that public administration and civil society can do big and difficult things. So, why is it that it took less than 10 years to put a man on the moon – when most of the technology didn’t even exist – and yet government digital transformation efforts flounder for decades in the mundane of portals and life-events?

Vision, governance and the disciplined execution of transformative endeavours by definition is not BAU. A different orchestration of effort is required – and the US Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) – provides a compelling model.

DARPA has a long track record of radical innovation. Among its phenomenal innovations is the Internet, global positioning satellites, stealth technology, and even micro-electrical-mechanical systems (MEMS) which are now pervasive in many products from air bags, ink-jet printers to video games like the Wii.

DARPA takes a systematic approach to solving really complex problems, dealing with unknown and unknowable variables. It pursues ambitious goals and challenging problems – with urgency. And often not with a big budget.

A ‘Digital Transformation Commission’ – in the DARPA model – would be commissioned to take on wicked problems. Why is it for example, that policy areas such as aged care and themselves are so devoid of digital innovation settings? The DTO/DTA either excluded themselves or were excluded from these areas.

With COVID-19 resulting in the most profound economic, social and service delivery crisis, surely there is an urgent role for a “Digital Transformation Commission” to catalyse and accelerate digital capabilities to build resilience for the coming twenty years?

The “Digital Transformation Commission” would work with other commissions, such as the Public Service Commission, to generate a massive injection of capability in the APS, not consultants – to give the transformation momentum and stewardship. Build Australian sovereign capability. Go beyond “training programs”, to a mobilisation footing – with the APS massively scaling its graduate and traineeship intake 10X in collaboration with Australian universities.

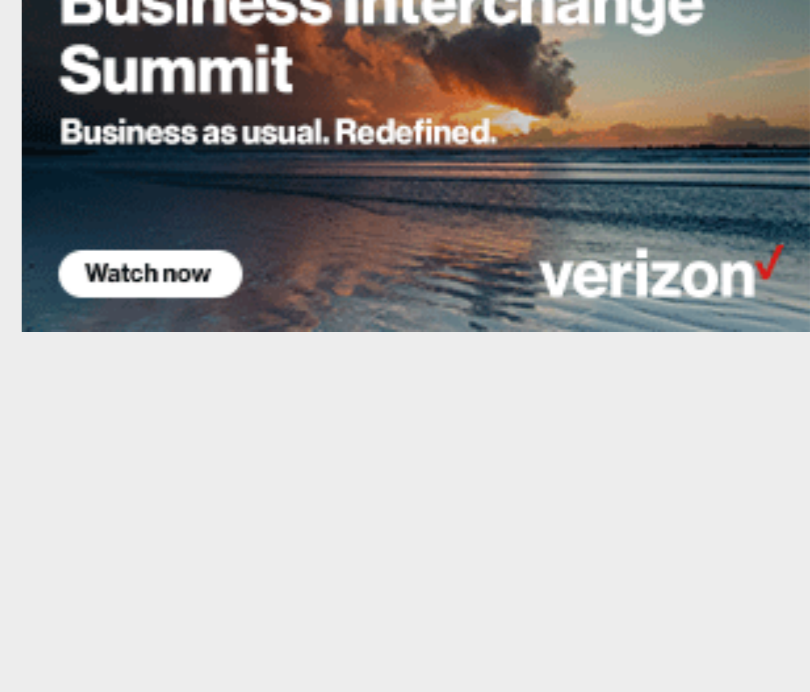
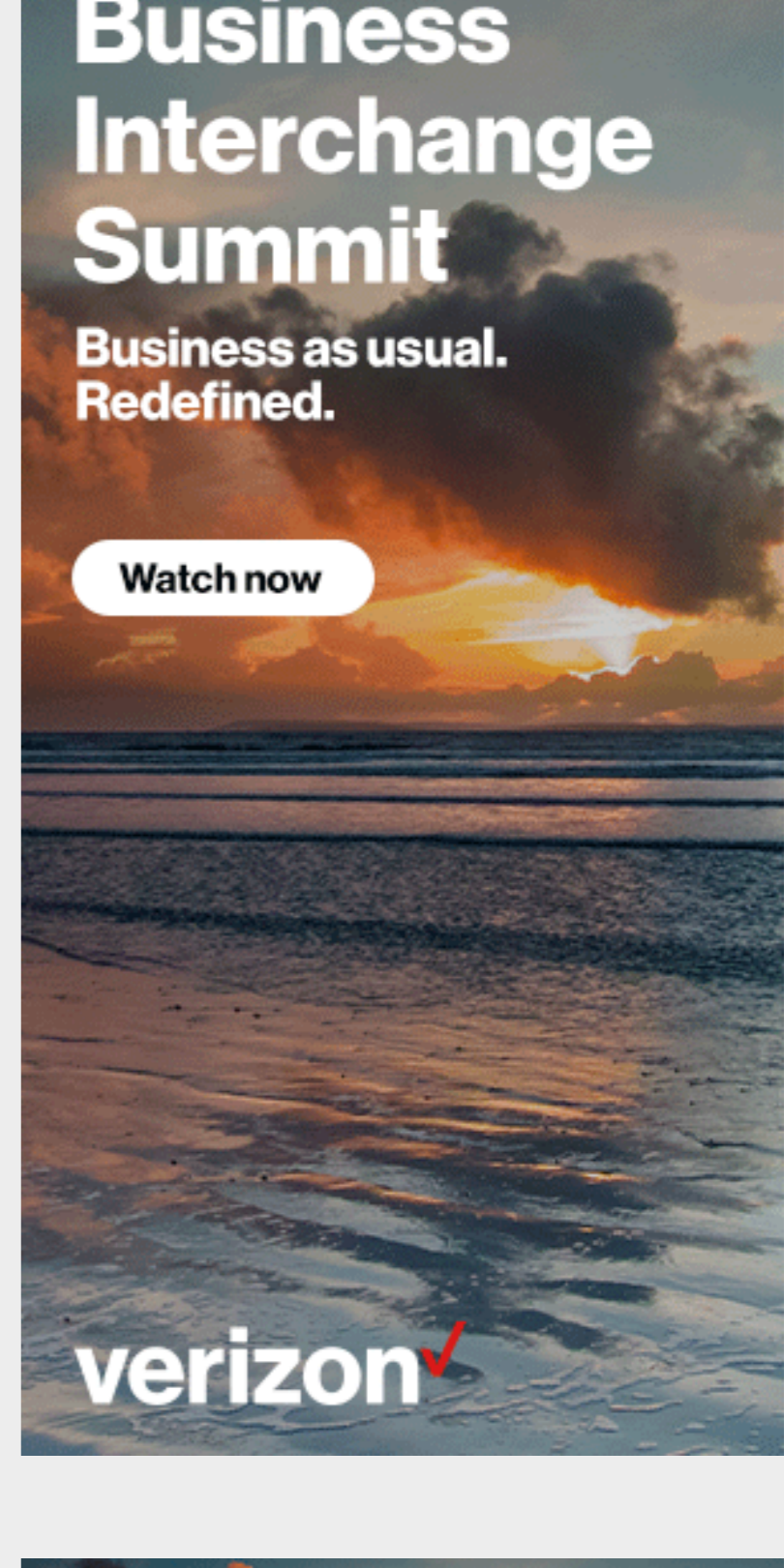
Is it not a concern therefore that the Australian ‘Data and Digital Council’ [is under review](#) after less than a year in operation? Has this COVID catastrophe not shown how utterly reliant our economy and society is on digital services?

This is not the time to give up or seek refuge in committees and roadmaps. Do not abandon my grandsons and their generation yet again because “digital is too hard”. We need to think big and move with urgency and confidence.

[Marie Johnson](#) was the Chief Technology Architect of the Health and Human Services Access Card program; at Immigration headed up the Visa Pricing Transformation and Digital Client Services; formerly Microsoft WorldWide Executive Director Public Services and eGovernment; and former Head of the NDIS Technology Authority. For many years, Marie was an independent member of the Australian Federal Police Spectrum Program Board. She is an inaugural member of the ANU Cyber Institute Advisory Board.

Do you know more? Contact James Riley via [Email](#) or [Signal](#).

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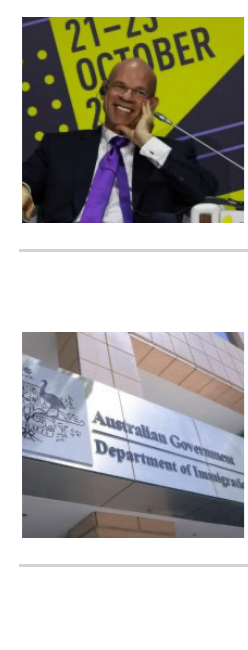
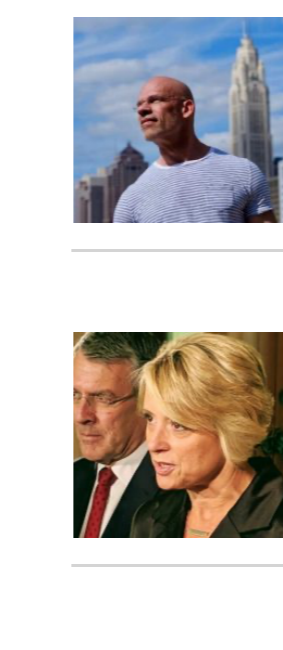


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