

Transcription of Podcast : Leading an Effective Digital Organisation

John Sumpter 0:03

On the eighth and ninth of March 2022, at the ICC in Birmingham and online Digifest 2022 was held by Jisc. At the event myself, Debbie Baff and Zach Gribble delivered a workshop entitled leading an effective digital organization. This podcast is our reflections from that event. Hello, Debbie Baff how are you?

Debbie Baff 0:30

I'm very well. Hello, John Sumpter. How are you?

John Sumpter 0:32

I'm very good. I'm very good. Thank you for spending some time with me to talk about our reflections of Digifest and the session that we ran on leading an effective digital organization.

Debbie Baff 0:47

Pleased to be here.

John Sumpter 0:49

Good. So, for the benefit of our listeners. This is a bit of a one off but we do intend on expanding on these in the future. But the point of today is we really want to talk about some of our reflections and key takeaways of the session that we ran at digifest. But we're not just going to do that we are going to let everybody know a little bit more about ourselves, a little bit about Digifest for those of you that weren't able to attend or don't know what Digifest is, a bit about our session, some takeaways and what's next. So that's the point of our little podcast today. Do you want to add anything to that Debs?

Debbie Baff 1:33

No, I think that's fine. I mean, yeah, as we were saying, we thought it'd be a good idea just to kind of pull together some of the key points that we really thought about from what people were saying. So it's not really a summary of the whole discussion, because obviously that would be impossible to do. It's just the sort of really snippets and gems that we thought might be helpful to share with other people.

John Sumpter 1:58

Yeah, absolutely. So before we get into the meat of our podcast, it's a good idea to let you know who we are. So I'll introduce myself first. So I'm John Sumpter, I'm a subject specialist here at Jisc. And I work alongside all of our colleagues in member support to support our members and customers from everything from infrastructure reviews, digital strategy, wellbeing, community development, and a whole range of aspects with almost everything to do with what Jisc provides to its members. So that's me, Debs. So let you introduce yourself.

Debbie Baff 2:35

So my name is Debbie Baff and I'm also a subject specialist in digital practice. at Jisc and my role specifically looks at the digital leaders program. I'm quite new to Jisc, I started in December, so just before Christmas, and I'm in my third month or so now and one of the things that I wanted to try and do is to review how we engage our members in terms of their community activities. And what we've done at Digifest recently has really kind of spoken to that. So I think that it would be really helpful going forward.

John Sumpter 3:12

Excellent, thank you Debs. So for those of you that weren't able to attend Digifest, or don't even know what Digifest is, let me just explain a little bit more. So it's an annual event that Jisc runs. This year it took place on the eighth and ninth of March, and it was delivered in person and also online. And in fact we had 725 delegates in person and 1296 people online, according to the latest stats I had. So a very popular event. And certainly from the feedback that myself and Debs have seen it's gone extremely well. So it was a great event to be part of. The event looked at a number of different themes. So it looked at well, the program themes were in fact changing for good, working together, shaping a sustainable future. So they were just some of the themes and of course we had some fantastic keynote speakers, lots of parallel sessions and workshops as well. And like I mentioned at the beginning, we were fortunate enough myself, Debs and our colleague Zac Gribble, to deliver a session on "leading an effective digital organization" and that's what we're feeding back on today and reflecting on. So Debbie, for context, do you want to tell everybody about what we did on the day please?

Debbie Baff 4:36

So what we wanted to do is it's to give people the opportunity to come together as a set of mini groups but also so that they'd have the opportunity to learn from other people that were in the room as well. We didn't actually know how many people we were going to get coming to this session. So what we thought we would do is make it as simple as possible. Now we did go down the route of thinking about using various digital tools obviously given the kind of nature of the conference itself we thought about using all of the different collaborative tools that are available, but then we took the decision that we would go kind of old school and have everything as simple as possible, and get people to go through a series of thought processes in which they would basically write something down on some sticky notes. So we then pulled that in into a canvas, a paper based canvas, which gave us structure to the sorts of questions that we were asking, and then the idea was that people would get together in like groups, they would talk about these issues that they're going through, and then come out with a summary at the end of it. And then each kind of table went around the room and discussed what they thought. So really what we're kind of doing in this podcast is picking out key snippets and key kind of gems that each of us have found within these particular sections that we've done. So the canvas itself that we were asking people to work with, said "leading an effective digital organization " that's the kind of strap line that we're working with. And what we were asking people is how they actually do that? . I mean, it's a big thing to ask, isn't it? So it's trying to break that down, and how people could take different steps to move towards their digital goals within the particular institutions, bearing in mind that there are people from all sorts of backgrounds, all sorts of management levels, and obviously, it

was really interesting, as I'm sure we'll talk about in a bit to see some of the shared problems and challenges that were coming out from their discussions. So I think we're going to share it as well, aren't we? We're going to kind of put out the kind of more data as it were that we were gained from it, but this hopefully will allow people to get a flavour of what we were talking about on the day.

[John Sumpter 7:03](#)

Yeah, absolutely. And I think it's worth saying as well Debbie that we had really good engagement on the day we had a full room all 10 tables were full. And we also we got people to think in a different way. So as you say, who people were maybe expecting a lot of use of digital tools. In actual fact, we use the old school approach because of the reasons why you said and actually we got them drawing things as well which really got them thinking in a different way. And I think that that seemed to go down well on the day and that participants seemed to enjoy that. So that's a fantastic overview and putting in context about what we did. So thanks for that, Debbie.

[Debbie Baff 7:41](#)

Okay, so one of the first things that we asked people to do was to really think about the key challenges and opportunities that they all faced, really in leading a digital organization. And we gave them you know, quite a sort of 10 minutes or 15 minutes or so to kind of think about this and to talk about it and we got them to put their answers on a postcard as it were on the on the paper format. And it was quite interesting, isn't it when you when you've been looking at the outputs from that. It does depend on where your viewpoint where you're coming from in terms of whether or not something is a challenge or whether it's an opportunity. That was one of the key things that came up for me. I know you've made some notes as well, John.

[John Sumpter 8:27](#)

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Debbie. And I totally agree with you. It depends on your viewpoint. And it's interesting how some of them can be, could be flipped. So, for example, some of the notes that I took out are the things that really jumped out at me with regards to the challenges that people found in leading a digital organization and we've got some really obvious things, not to belittle them but you know, we knew they were coming. So things like infrastructure, always an issue. Time nobody's ever got enough time have they? But then we got some more interesting thoughts as well or not more interesting, but certainly things that you don't often think of and that is, for example, the art of the possible How do we know what is possible? What can we do what is great or what does excellent? look like? What can I achieve? That was one that jumped out for me. Future talent management, I think a really interesting topic which we can come back to in a moment, and lack of vision, lack of vision, came out time and time again throughout our whole activity in actual fact, and that was clearly from an organizational perspective, because that's what we're talking about. There was also some really interesting opportunities and funnily enough, like we were saying, you can flip them so in fact, the art of the possible there's also an opportunity as an opportunity for us to, you know, organizations to do so much better in that and to help people develop, again, future talent management, that's an opportunity as well as being a challenge. But other things that came out were collaboration, digital pedagogy, and digital skills. Now they're just kind of my key takeaways and everybody's going to have access to the entire

board that we collated for the day and you can drill down deeper and have a look at all of the other suggestions we had. But that was the key ones that came out for me, and how did you reflect on what came out? Early?

Debbie Baff 10:29

Yeah, I think it was quite interesting. I don't know whether it's, it's particularly because of the timeframe that we're living in now in a kind of semi post pandemic world and what have you. That the whole the whole aspect of emphasizing the people side of things came across for me, and whether or not that's a challenge or an opportunity. Again, you can see it, you know, from a number of different perspectives, but it was the, there was a lot of discussion about sort of having an empathy and empathetic approach in leadership. And you know, that that is really nice to kind of influence where people are going now in terms of strategic management. So, some of the things that you you've noted on it, particularly for the future, talent management and the time aspect for me, both kind of sit together because obviously, with the fact that we've had people, you know, working remotely and you know, you've got a much larger pool of staff to draw from now if you are still enabling, working remotely and all that kind of thing. Again, depending on whether you're seeing it is a challenge or an opportunity depends on your particular circumstance, but I really do feel that a lot of the conversations kind of centred around that aspect that just because we're talking about a digital organization doesn't mean that tools are the answers to everything. It's the fact that you have to have the right people in the right roles with the right skills to enable that kind of overall, moving forward where we are now.

John Sumpter 12:13

Yeah, no, I absolutely agree with Debbie and all of you know that that main drive that you said about people as opposed to the technology, fortunately for us, kind of proves that the work we've been doing around leadership and culture has been correct, because that's the work that we're really kind of championing at the moment and our members during this session are telling us that as well. So we're really pleased that we're on the right lines with regards to supporting our members, and we'll be able to provide far more examples and resources and guides at the end of this podcast to people as well. So yeah, a great first part of the session, and some really important topics to discuss further.

So moving on, from our first question about what are the challenges and opportunities that people face in leading a digital organization? We then promptly moved on to much more richly intensive session for some people around vision of what should an effective digital organization look like? What should it feel like? What should it represent? So we were going beyond just thinking about the technology as such, we're thinking more about kind of people and culture as well. And some really interesting things came out and Debbie, I know you want to pick up on a couple of those. You want to kind of pick up your on your favourites first.

Debbie Baff 13:40

Yeah, it was. It was an interesting exercise and it's something that we do in one of our workshops, we run the vision for change workshop where we kind of get people to draw their organization. So we thought, we took a bit of a risk because obviously it was a very short

session and we wanted people to, to just kind of run with it really. And we weren't sure if people were going to actually embrace it or not, but they did, you know, we had a reasonable good selection of drawings. And, you know, it's one of these things you put yourself out there, isn't it? It's, I don't want to draw anything. It's going to look really stupid. But, you know, it didn't. I mean, to be fair, they're amazing. Some of these things that we've got on here, it's just the sheer variety in how people see it. I mean, some people chose to just offer kind of key words and some of the things that came out with things like an effective digital organization should be transparent, it should be sustainable. It should be inclusive. It should be seamless. I really like that kind of visual image of the fact that everything is kind of digitally integrated, you know, when we're talking about strategies as well. That's one of the things that came out for me really strongly is that digital should be embedded it shouldn't be a bolt on additional thing that you have within your kind of shouldn't have a separate digital strategy it should be embedded with everything you do. And looking at some of the drawings. You know, there's a range of some people have done it as more of like a road map, where they've talked about kind of the different places involved. So we've got kind of the home and the work divide and maybe the differences in remote and obviously at the moment, you know, that's the whole focus on whether or not the physical or the digital infrastructure should be kind of enhanced, you know, there's still a massive a massive investment that's needed within physical infrastructure and maybe you know, people are thinking now that you know, there isn't, this still isn't enough in terms of the digital aspects of it. So one of these things here says, about kind of focusing on the task, not the technology, that's really what they thought that it should be looking like. There was another great one as well, where they kind of almost drew it like a house. So they had, you know, the whole idea of seamless learning and inclusive learning and the fact that you'd have an agile mindset from people, that's really what the organization should look like. And there was the aspect of equality came out a lot as well. And I think that I wonder whether or not you know, going through the pandemic may have helped start kind of level the playing field as we're going along. As I said, some of the other things as well. There were lots of lightbulbs being drawn in which was great, you know, in terms of the different ideas and things like that, and it did you see that spiderweb one that was really interesting as well

[John Sumpter 16:51](#)

yeah, yeah, no, absolutely. And, you know, some of the things that you've mentioned, it really resonate with what we think about in the digital leaders program. You mentioned a number of things that so for example, the journey and we use that narrative that everybody's on this digital journey, and everybody nobody ever gets to the end. And most people aren't at the beginning. There's somewhere in the middle and they're trying to work their way along that journey, and it's a hard thing to do. You also picked up on the technology side of it and something a post it note that I really liked, and actually kind of speaks to this message is that 'light switch technology'. What I like about that is that people want effective technology effective processes that support and develop and enhance an organization to work better, doesn't always have to be incredibly complicated and expensive. Actually, we could probably utilize some processes and technology that is just more like a light switch, you know, it's either offer its own, always have to be the most expensive and incredibly complicated piece of technology

Debbie Baff 18:02

is no sorry, I'm just going to say it's not. Technology isn't actually the answer. And you can't just throw money at it. That's not the solution is it? It's all of the stuff that underpins it, really, and that was coming out, kind of really strongly in terms of people's visions, and also, I should say, as well. They still kind of focused on removing barriers, you know, in terms of silo cultures and things like that. But again, one of the key things to me that came out was the trust, if the trust the nature of trusting, trusting of staff, and the fact that we've all been through this kind of this horrendous thing over the last couple of years. And you'd like to think that we can draw on all of those skills that we've learned in terms of kind of moving forward. When I've talked about integrated I really see that as integrating it with people as well. So not just the digital aspect of it actually drawing on the experience that we've all had as kind of joint system really.

John Sumpter 19:09

Yeah, absolutely. And kind of, as you said, learning from what we've what we've been able to positively gain from the pandemic if there is such a thing, but the fact that we've now become more used to remote working flexible working. We know that education and teaching delivery is changing because of this, but it's really taking the best bits of those and not going backwards to how it was before. And that that came across really clear didn't have that people didn't want to go back to how it was before and they wanted to take the best of what's come out of it and take that forward. So absolutely. some really interesting points that came out of this.

Debbie Baff 19:51

It's a mindset thing as well, isn't it really, I mean, when we kind of asked people to summarize where they wanted to get to a lot of the kind of thing that came out if there was, you know, you need that kind of buy in from people, you need them to shift their mindset, the fact that we are where we are now. And we have to, as you say, kind of draw on the experiences and the gains that we have made over the last two years or so, you know, we really don't want to go back in my opinion. We don't want to go back to the kind of how we were before. I don't think that we can really, and going through the pandemic, you know that there is a danger that people think, Oh, well, we're going back to we're going back to face to face full time. You know, we don't need to think about kind of blended opportunities. We're actually there's, you know, there's a lot of good stuff that's come out of it. So it's having that kind of in your in your toolkit because we've got a different set of tools now when we go in going forward. Yeah,

John Sumpter 21:00

absolutely. Absolutely. I couldn't agree more. And, again, that kind of relates that metaphor that we use on the program around having a toolkit and it's using the right tools for the right job. technology and how we support technology and support people to develop is absolutely core to that. So I think overall, this particular session, we gave people about 15 minutes and we I think it's a little bit longer to reflect and draw their representations and we had some fantastic drawings which you can see. But I think just to finish off on this particular section you're absolutely right there being effective, transparent, sustainable, and inclusive, were key messages that kind of came out of this session.

Debbie Baff 21:42

One of the other things we did ask people to look at as well was, what sort of key steps that they would need to take to ensure that they could reach their vision, which was a bit of a tall order, really, to come up with that in the timescale that we gave them but they had a good go. I mean, some of the things that that really come across to me, was a real acknowledgement in the room to accept the fact that you can't change everything at once. We kind of have to go step by step. And it's only by I suppose, this is where lots of things like open communication and kind of being honest and that kind of thing not trying to run before you can walk as well, I think. I mean, some of the other things as well that they were talking about, you know, where the lack of time came out as a challenge but also really came out in terms of the action that we need to find that time so you need to enable staff to do the things they need to do in terms of recognizing their digital skills, what they what they know what they need to know and also, sometimes it's not that someone doesn't necessarily have the skills is that they literally can't see how it can be useful for them. And in a lot of these cases as well. But once somebody cottons on to the fact that there may be some sort of digital tool out there, that's actually going to save them time in the long run. You know, it's getting them kind of over that first hurdle. So it is really crystallizing the whole nature of let's set aside some time to really focus on the skills that we need going forward in the future.

John Sumpter 23:36

Yeah, I completely agree with your summary that, Deborah, what I would say is that a couple of the key takeaways that I've noticed from this activity would be identifying end goals that really jumped out as a clear message and really important one, facilitating time and space for this to happen. That's clearly an action that need needs to happen. But also to enable opportunities for co creation and collaboration. They definitely jump out.

Debbie Baff 24:06

Yeah, that came up really strongly. I think actually its important to listen to people so listen to your staff, listen to your students and see how we can work together. Because obviously, the idea of co creation comes into play when you're communicating with each other. You need to have really strong lines of communication. This comes back to what you were saying about identifying the goals. You need to know where you're going and also to know how to get there kind of thing. And I would say as well one of the key things that came up to me was this point that we should be kind of taking baby steps. So admitting that maybe we don't have to do it all in one go. We can kind of do it bit by bit. And that you know, all these kind of little changes that you're able to make have a compound effect at the end of it doesn't all have to be done in one go

John Sumpter 25:00

So I hope you've enjoyed our reflections on the session that we ran at digifest and all it remains for myself and Debbie is to say thanks ever so much for listening. And just to leave you with the thought that we're working on leadership and culture and a lot of the aspects that we've talked about today and our reflections are covered in the work that we do. So in the blog post, you'll find a link to our leadership and culture page. And from there as well you'll find at the bottom of that page access to our blog that we're developing as well. So for

a lot of these topics, check out that webpage and there's lots of really useful practical advice and guidance workshops and thought leadership all around the subject,

Debbie Baff 25:43

I should say as well. We have a community set up as well. So you can join that. There's a link to that on the webpage as well. So that would be great. It's free to join.

John Sumpter 25:54

It's free to join. Absolutely. So and we welcome everyone to come along and we look forward to seeing that in the community. So for myself and Debbie, thanks ever so much for listening, and we will be sending some more messages out in the near future. Goodbye

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