



CharityComms podcast – episode 3 transcript

Robyn: And we're back! Welcome to episode three of the CharityComms podcast. If you're a returning listener, it's great to have you back. And if you're new here, welcome. I'm Robyn, the events officer at CharityComms.

Sushi: And I'm Sushi and I'm the digital content manager.

Robyn: And we're here to bring you the hot topics from our events and dive that much deeper with the speakers.

Sushi: For this episode we've decided to tackle the subject that seems to be the hot topic of the year – content strategy. Why is it trending? Isn't it just a template you fill out at the beginning of the year? Let's find out!

Robyn: Hmmmm hmm. Coming up, we've got two interviews with speakers who presented at our Content strategy conference earlier this year. First up is Claudia Knowles, digital content strategist at Breast Cancer Care. At the conference she shared her experience working on the charity's new app, BECCA, which aims to help people find their new normal after breast cancer. She talked us through the content lessons they learned in developing the app and how they worked iteratively to shape a product as best suited to the users' needs as possible.

Sushi: We also spoke to Amanda Diamond, senior content lead at the Government Digital Service about how she approached the mammoth task of managing gov.uk's 350,000 items of content, tackling both strategy and management.

Robyn: But first, our interview with Claudia. Here it is.

[Applause]

Claudia: I'm Claudia. I'm the digital content strategist at Breast Cancer Care and I've been there for about a year and a half. At Breast Cancer Care we have an amazing face-to-face service called Moving Forward, which helps women and gives them professional advice as well as emotional support, and actually the most important thing about them, I think, is that they introduce other people to women who have had really similar experiences, so they can all share the same emotions. What I'm going to talk to you about today is how we created a digital product that could extend the value of that face-to-face service. How did we create a digital product? Well, what we did was create BECCA. This is our app. So BECCA is the Breast Cancer



Care App which is a series of flashcards with hints and tips on adapting to life after treatment. There are 12 different categories with content ranging from managing menopausal symptoms which are a side-effect of hormone treatment, also anxiety or healthy eating and also blogs and personal stories. You can favourite cards and come back to them later or you can flick through the daily five which are randomly generated. It launched last May, and we've got about 9,000 – almost 9,000 downloads at the moment. What we hope is that it is someone's pocket guide to life beyond breast cancer.

So why do we actually need a digital product at this point? Why do we need additional innovation when we had, as I mentioned, these face-to-face services and a clinical team of experts who people could call during the day on our free helpline or speak to our nurses online, professional support from face-to-face services like Moving Forward, and something that these gave which we didn't think we could through digital which was shared experience. But we also knew that digital could provide things that face-to-face services couldn't. So it's portable. You can put it in your pocket. So, someone who is standing at the bus stop and is suddenly overwhelmed with anxiety, can just reach into their pocket for support. It's also accessible at any time. So, in the middle of the night when our helpline is closed, this is a point when actually you can become overwhelmed with feelings more than any other time. So, if someone could reach to their bedside for support that would be great. Finally, and this is a really important reason as to why we wanted an app and not just a website, was we wanted to filter through all of the overwhelming content that appears online when you're researching around illness. We wanted to pick out content we thought and knew would be valuable and give that to the user in a safe and comforting space.

Robyn: Hi Claudia. Thanks so much for coming in today.

Claudia: Thanks so much for having me.

Robyn: We've got Sushi in the room as well.

Sushi: Hello.

Robyn: So, what were the hopes of BECCA when it was being formed and as you were working on it, as you were going along, did that change, adapt and grow?

Claudia: Yeah.

Robyn: Yeah.



Claudia: Yeah. So the background of BECCA, the Breast Cancer Care App is what it stands for, is really the – that supports women who have recently finished treatment and that's a point where they come out of active treatment having been put on this rollercoaster ride – the NHS have a brilliant treatment plan, it's all very fast paced, very busy, everything is taken care of, and then suddenly at the end they're let go to kind of come to terms with what has happened to them. That is an incredibly difficult time and a time where they maybe don't feel comfortable speaking to their friends and family because they don't want to talk to them about it and make them upset. About a quarter of women struggle with anxiety at this point and many with depression. So, then the idea for an app sprung about to meet this need as well but to meet it digitally.

Sushi: It almost is really testing that concept of the power of storytelling. You know? People talk about it, and that phrase is quite a popular phrase, but this is really showing you the actual reality of that and how important it is to help people feel, not only connected, but, as you were saying, they are kind of understanding of that kind of information – they are able to absorb it in a way that is actually useful to them and is providing them with support or that outlet they need.

Claudia: Yeah, and often the words to describe what they feel as well and I think anyone – so many people have probably experienced some tension in their chest or in their head and emotion and not being able to express it, and not knowing how to say something, and then you can read something else, maybe it's a poem that expresses that or maybe it's someone's story with words that express that, and suddenly that makes you – it makes me feel relaxed and released and someone else has been able to express something I haven't and, now that I have those words, I now have the vocabulary to be able to talk about my own experience with. And once I can do that then I can start coming to terms with it.

Claudia: And something which we didn't quite anticipate doing was showing us that we needed to think about our tone of voice. We thought that we knew how to speak to people online but we realised that BECCA was actually a really different space to that. It's very personal and much more intimate, and people wanted to be spoken to as though they were a person, not a newsfeed. So, what we did was we started doing split tests, little AB tests. So we would get two cards, both going to the same content but with two different tones of voice on them, and tried that to see what would work best. What we found were things which were non-presumptuous but still personal did best. So something like, "If you're unsure about what to do, why not try this?" So, we weren't assuming that we knew how they felt. What we ended up doing once we got all of these analytics around the tone of voice



was drawing up a list of characteristics about BECCA's tone of voice, as though she was a person. This could then be rolled out across our social channels for any BECCA posts, as well as our email to create a recognisable voice.

Robyn: You realised the way that feelings and thoughts are being communicated within the app and the way that someone is experiencing that is different to how they would be if they were just scrolling through a Facebook timeline?

Claudia: Yeah, that was a huge learning for us actually. We have a forum, but we don't – we allow everyone else to talk through it. We don't really interfere; we monitor it.

Robyn: Yeah.

Claudia: And then we have social media and we have Facebook and Instagram. We know how to talk to people on those platforms, and Twitter. On Facebook something like 'Five simple exercises to get back into exercise after treatment' or something like that.

Robyn: That's far more prescriptive.

Claudia: Yeah, probably something a bit snappier than that! [Laughter] But something like this might have a really high click-through rate on Facebook.

Robyn: Yes.

Claudia: But then in the app it was too impersonal and we realised that an app was a very personal space and we want to get it to the point where it's personalised but, at the moment, and especially when it was in beta phase, it wasn't.

Claudia: So we've learnt what users wanted. What do we actually do with these analytics? It's quite easy to gather data and then you've got to actually use it to do something beneficial for your product. Well instead of waiting until the end of the testing phase, which was about eight months, to do a huge card review, we just checked it weekly and we made changes weekly. So we made small iterations, learning from our mistakes, learning from what did well, to changing the content to see if that improved the statistics. And, little by little, we managed to get a sort of more unified idea of what kind of content we were creating. Probably more importantly we actually learned what our clinical team, our stakeholders, wanted as well. So from the



very beginning of the project we brought them in because we knew that we needed to harness their clinical expertise. So we created a content review panel through which every single BECCA card went through, and that was made up of our nurses, and every card today still goes through that panel.

Sushi: If a charity was thinking about creating an app for a particular purpose, do you think there are some things that you've learned that could be universally applied, or do you think it has to be individual to each charity depending on their testing?

Claudia: Thinking about creating an app in the first place, as to why you create an app and not something else. So I guess the main thing is making sure that an app is the right platform for what you want to do and having a really clear aim. So we had a very clear aim. We just were working out which way to get there and that was to support women after treatment.

So I think listening to their audience – from the first moment Christina, my colleague, was talking to our service users and our product champions, and we brought them in from the very, very beginning, and before BECCA was even an idea, she was speaking to them and finding out what they wanted, finding out what would be helpful. And then when it came to content, I was working with them again to create tips/blogs with them for how to use BECCA. So we managed to acquire over 1,000 people to test the beta app, all of whom had had breast cancer diagnosis, simply from organic social posts as well.

Robyn: Fantastic.

Sushi: Yeah, that's really great. Wow.

Claudia: So we got a lot of people very quickly, which I think just proved the need as well for this app.

Robyn: Absolutely.

Claudia: People were so happy to be part of the testing process, and to be part of something where they can actually make a difference as well, and where they were being listened to. So, I think for any charity it's about listening, engaging with the people who are going to use it and bringing them to the forefront of the development process.



Claudia: What we were now doing was harnessing the human expertise of our users and connecting with them on a whole new emotional level by speaking through their voice as well. This actually led to an organisation-wide change in the way that we produced digital content on all of our platforms, which is now far more user-led and user-focused.

Sushi: So the digital team was great at doing this but presumably you need to work with other parts of the business to get BECCA to work? Is there any conflict there or are they very receptive to the concept of BECCA and the testing approach of it, or, you know, really were looking for the challenges that you face?

Claudia: Yeah. Well one challenge was the fact that this would be the first time that the digital team was creating content and putting out a service as opposed to the services teams and the breast care nurses, and it was down to us to decide what content we would put there, and directing them to loads of external links, not just to our website which wasn't really something that we did at all.

So the clinical team were probably wary of what we were going to direct to. So what we did was create a content review panel and at first – I think there was a lot of apprehension at first and there was a lot of red pen and a lot of edits and, “We can't link to this! What is this?” and then little-by-little I think they started becoming more comfortable with what we were linking to, but probably because, and more importantly, we had learned what they wanted and what kind of support they were used to giving. Yeah, it was an amazing way to learn from them through this editing process.

Robyn: Yeah. So with the panel of nurses and then the feedback from users, did you find there was a disconnected between what the nurses were suggesting you should be putting in and linking to, and then the kind of thing that your users actually wanted to see? Because whether maybe they were more towards the peer-to-peer stuff rather than stuff that may be a clinical nurse who would be, “This is really what you want to be putting out there.”

Claudia: Yeah. So the nurses would say - always direct people to the information, which we had all of our information pages in there. But then there might be stuff around yoga and mindfulness and maybe some less clinical things and sites that people find support from which the nurses just probably haven't directed to before. I mean they direct people to sources for getting into exercise and things but there were, I guess, just different sites and different ideas that were suggested to us that we put in and see do well. What we used to do was just try and find content and source it, and we did that for the first year or so. Now we've got an amazing technology which crawls the internet for similar urls to the ones that we're linking to, and then



will bring them up into – we've now got CMS, whereas we were just working on spreadsheets.

Robyn: Yeah.

Claudia: We've now got a proper CMS which has been developed by Super Being Labs developed the app as well. The technology is called Skim It and it will populate and it will give you all of these card ideas and it will say, "Oh here is another blog from this person that you referenced", or "Here's a page from another website that might be good content."

Robyn: How cool.

Claudia: So now, suddenly, we've got all of this content generation, it's incredible. It's absolutely amazing to see.

Robyn: Yeah.

Claudia: Having had to sort of crawl through myself, having machine learning do it instead, and that's pretty cool.

Sushi: That is amazing, yeah.

Claudia: So now we just have to edit it into the right tone of voice.

Robyn: Yeah. In your process of working on BECCA, what would you say was the biggest hurdle that you came up against or anything you found particularly tricky?

Claudia: Content wise, I think the biggest challenge was learning how to give support through an app. We kind of went in it blind because we'd never made an app before for that purpose, and just a lot of learning and willingness to learn from the nurses, from the users, and still doing that I think, and still trying to develop new ways of giving content, and that has now, the learnings that we've taken from BECCA have now been spread out across the charity as well, especially the digital team and the way that we talk about different aspects of the charity and bringing in personal stories and case studies and the people who we run our services for, bringing them to the centre of everything that we do and the way that we talk about everything.

Robyn: I think you gave some really interesting information about the fact you were using analytics to shape as you were going along, but what kind of analytics would you say are the ones that you really keep an eye on at the moment that let you know if things are going the right way, or if you're having a particular success in certain areas or anything like that?



Claudia: Well something we noticed was that we would have huge spikes in app use whenever we put out social posts. Which sounds obvious when you put it like that. The original reason we were putting out social posts was to – and the aim of that was to drive people to the app but then we also realised that it was driving people to the app who had already downloaded it. That does make sense.

Robyn: Yeah.

Claudia: But wasn't something that we were thinking about.

Robyn: Yeah.

Claudia: So that's been really interesting in terms of retention and engagement and thinking about how we engage with people who are already in the app and whether that's through social or through what ways we can – what more we can give to them outside of that.

Robyn: So is there anything on the horizon that was maybe sparked off by the success of BECCA or things that were already in the works that you guys are going to be working on, or furthering the project like ways you'll help it be self-sustaining or anything?

Claudia: Yeah. Well something that I've been working on, because of the successes of BECCA, is a writing guide to help people write about their experience after treatment ends. Because what we found with BECCA was that the blogs were by far the most powerful and most engaged-with content.

Robyn: Yeah.

Claudia: And then, from that, we started building up all of the personal stories and blogs on our website and using far more – we now only use case studies and personal stories on the social pretty much. And if there is anything you want to talk about, we'll talk about it through someone who is either – so say it's an event, it will be someone who has done the event but also used our services and just really engaging with – always engaging with the reason behind things and the cause.

Robyn: Yeah.

Sushi: So how are you starting something like this? Are you drawing inspiration from other charities that have done similar things?

Claudia: Yeah, I kind of started from scratch and did some research and looked into narrative medicine which is an area which is quite big in American medicine, and that's the idea that you use someone's personal



story to help with their recovery, and really trying to distinguish what it is about the lived life that is effected when you become ill, and how those are the things that need to be cared for when someone is ill.

Yeah. So thinking about all of that and how talking therapies, like psychoanalysis and writing and expression, really help people understand that for themselves and put that into context and help them come to terms with it. And a lot of the ideas that in phenomenology of illness, how someone might be affected through breast cancer, a lot of those aspects, when I'm talking to people for blogs, they then say, "Oh it's helped me put my life back into perspective" or the side effects from their treatment they now can manage due to practical tips and also manage the emotional side of it too.

Sushi: It just makes me think that it really puts the "care& part into Breast Cancer Care, and it really speaks to your mission as an organisation. That's really fantastic. It's still mind-blowing that it's not even a year old. That is remarkable; absolutely remarkable.

Claudia: So exciting.

Claudia: So, there are three things to take away with you today. Firstly, try, test and don't assume. Do not assume that you know what is best for your users, or that you know what would be most popular. We were totally wrong with that. Also, don't just use your analytics for KPIs. Use it to actually guide your content and make iterative changes along the way. Secondly, harness the power of narrative. Use stories within your content. They are an incredibly powerful tool and the one that digital's actually best present. Finally, remember that your users are human. Find your tone of voice, speak to them as a human and then give them a voice too. Thank you very much.

[Applause]

Robyn: I just think BECCA is a really impressive product as an holistic idea from beginning to finish. I think they started out with a really –

Sushi: Not finished yet!

Robyn: Oh that's very true! Yeah, that's exactly it though isn't it? I suppose that the finished idea is a product that is never finished, and it's created with a really clear need in mind. They knew who they were talking to because they kept talking to them to see what they wanted to hear and what they



wanted to see and read, and they've realised that that works and so they're sticking with it, and they're continuing to develop.

Sushi: Yeah. I think it's really, really impressive. They should be really proud. And really inspirational for the charity sector; something we can all learn from.

Robyn: Absolutely! So well done guys!

Sushi: So Claudia gave us a crash course in developing content on a new platform, but what about when you're tasked with the challenge of managing an existing estate of content that's fairly vast, and creating an effective strategy for generating new content?

Robyn: Well, Amanda Diamond from the Government Digital Service has quite a lot of experience with this. We caught up with her to get the lowdown.

[Applause]

Amanda: So yes, I'm Amanda. I'm the content lead at the Government Digital Service. Today I am going to be talking about how gov.uk supports effective content production in a vast and complex organisation, and how we are measuring the quality and success of that content. I'll be honest, I don't have all of the answers to solve these things here today. What I can do is share with you some of the things that we're doing at GDS in these areas, and I can share some of the things that we've learned along the way.

Broadly, our content is kind of split into two groups, what we are calling our mainstream content and Whitehall content. So mainstream content for us is our citizen-facing, our business-facing content that helps folks do a thing; so like getting an MOT or claiming Child Benefit. This content is managed within a central team in GDS. They're highly skilled, highly capable, digitally literate and they have a very, very clear and established process for content management.

Then we have what we're calling our Whitehall content and this is all of the other stuff on gov.uk. It includes government policies, consultations, statistics etc. Crucially, this is operated by a devolved content management process. So this type of content is published by teams in individual government departments and agencies all around the country.

So while we have a great deal of content that actually helps people do a thing, like registering to vote or applying for a passport online, we also have lots of content that we need to publish for transparency reasons because we,



as we should do, have to allow people to hold government to account. So the result of having all of these different types of content means that we've got nearly 108,000 publications on gov.uk. Now that's a huge stock. That's too much to manage. And, what's more, we actually discovered that about two thirds of that content is viewed by fewer than 10 people a month. Now that's a massive problem. Users' time is being wasted because they have to sift through loads of content to find what they actually need.

Having so much content obviously has a lot of challenges. But it also raised a few questions when we were starting to look at this more strategically. Who is publishing all of this content and why are they doing it? So to better understand their needs, we had to ask questions like what environments are they working in? How are they using and interacting with the publishing applications that we provide them? And what are their challenges and their pain points within their environment?

So we invested some time and resource in doing some user research and we visited 20 government departments and agencies and conducted 38 contextual interviews. What we found was quite a few common themes and, I suppose unsurprisingly, one of the things that came out quite strong is that different parts of government have got very different and often competing priorities, and they're not necessarily interested in the needs of the end user. Often it's policy folks who have the final say, not content folks.

Also, we discovered that there is a huge difference in the level of digital content capabilities across government. And then, finally, we found that there were a lot of limitations with the publishing applications that we were providing publishers, one of the problems being limited access to data and we had found that data is the key, as I'll go on to talk about in a minute. So the problems with limited access to data meant that content folks were not being able to make informed decisions and push back to policy colleagues about the content that was being given to them to publish. Another problem we found was limited data showing the relative value or success of a piece of content.

Robyn: Amanda, it's so great to have you here, thanks for coming in.

Amanda: You're very welcome. Great to be here.

Robyn: Battling the pollen to get in. I know that you're struggling.

Amanda: Yes, it's a bad day for pollen today.

Robyn: Yeah.



Amanda: But I'm sure we'll cope.

Robyn: And Sush as well, how are you dealing?

Sushi: Yeah, I'm dying!

Robyn: Hopefully, if I'm the last one standing, I'll keep the interview going! We were wondering about establishing what it means for content to be quality or successful? Would you say that's one very important tool? Would you say that is the most important thing to establish in terms of creating publishing tools for everyone to use?

Amanda: So I think it's probably a combination of many different data points. So obviously we've got things like – we've got publishing guidance, obviously our style guides; so we have all of these mechanisms that encourage content creation best practice. So I think what we are trying to do with our publishing tool is to integrate a bit more the style guide and integrate more our guidance so that we can actually steer a consistent approach.

Sushi: So you talk about it as the kind of workflow and this is almost like getting lots of different people in lots of different places to the same point almost? So they won't be sitting in the same office and you can't have face-to-face meetings with all of them, so is this what that tool is going to do? Is it going to do that stuff by allowing you to do it wherever they are?

Amanda: Yes. So, we have different channels through which we can communicate with those government publishers, but the most reliable way to get to those people is through the tool that they're using. So that is why we are kind of investing in that route, because that will also help us get our guidance in front of people at the point at which they need it rather than directing them off to somewhere else to read a long document, so kind of like in a micro-copy kind of a way, while also using kind of nudge behaviour.

So if we are building into our tool for instance, spark charts of different pieces of content and how it's performing, or if we're flagging up going, "Oh, did you mean this? There's another piece of content that already has this title", or whatever it might be. It is encouraging behaviour that will help people to review, pause in their flurry to create a new thing and then hopefully it will engender better content creation, production and management practices.

Sushi: What inspired that approach? I mean I've got some thoughts about where that might have come from but I don't want to assume anything, but what inspired this approach? What made you go, "This is probably the route"?

Amanda: Oh gosh, that's a big question. I'll have to take you back! I'll take you on a journey back in time!



[Laughter]

Robyn: We'll have sound effects for that!

Amanda: So maybe about 18 months ago now, maybe two years ago, we recognised that people were having difficulty finding the right content on the front end on gov.uk. So we needed to review how we can make it easier for people to manage what is already there and for users to be able to find what's there, without other stuff getting in the way. Then we kind of came up with a whole host of issues that our publishers told us were kind of pain points for them, not least that we had lots of different publishing applications that were all a little bit different or slightly quirky in their own little ways, and that's confusing and slowing production down and all of that kind of thing.

Then we kind of move forward a bit in time, we came up with kind of a journey map that kind of we broadly would fit all of the different kind of publishing environments in which people were working. And so we worked out what the sort of happy path through the difficult sort of publishing –

Robyn: Was that official terminology?

Amanda: What's the happy path?! Ooh, these are all very difficult! Okay, what's the easiest route through this gnarly environment? And so then we built on that. We were thinking, "Okay, well this is the most simplistic route that publishers will have to take from, like, creating a piece of content to publishing a piece of content." Then we just started testing concepts with publishers. We gave a few sort of – we just kind of built it basically to, you know, ask, learn, test basically.

Sushi: Okay. So let's get real. There will still be, surely, some people that just, even though you've got this kind of concept that is meant to help get people to the right place on content, some people might not get it still. Right? Surely that's got to be a thing?

Amanda: Well, I mean, people are only human and, also, if it's not the majority of your job to be a content designer, then there will be different levels of skill, absolutely, yeah, and capability.

Sushi: How do you deal with that then?

Amanda: Well that's where we have different channels through training and so we have a very, very vibrant content community across government. So at GDS we have what we call Communities of Practice, and so content being a very, very robust and strong community of practice, and so our community team within GDS at the moment, they run training sessions for cross-government publishers on a whole host of different areas of content design,



from sort of like basic entry level writing for digital audiences, to then more advanced kind of senior content design level.

We also run kind of like just peer-to-peer shadowing, so somebody from a government content team can come and shadow our team and we can work through what problems they might have, how we might be able to assist them. We have a lot of different channels. It's not, as you say, you've got to get real. People have got busy jobs and they're not going to go, "Oooh, I'm just going to educate myself on this point of style today!"

[Laughter]

Sushi: That sounds like a good Friday morning.

Amanda: I know – who are these people?! So, you know, we have to be mindful and realistic. So we have tried to develop these different sort of channels to kind of reach people when they need it really.

Sushi: Yeah.

Amanda: And let them know that we are there to help as well when they need.

Robyn: You mentioned in your talk, the idea about making the platform that you're on work harder for you.

Amanda: Hmmm.

Robyn: So, for example, retiring low value content after a period of time. So charity digital teams, you know, they're familiar with pushing for their content to be priority but could any of these tips be used to mediate those pressures?

Sushi: How would you apply it if you weren't able to redevelop a whole CMS?

Amanda: Yeah.

Sushi: And create wonderful workflows? Having gone through the exercise of thinking about this, what sort of low cost tips would you pull out and say, "These are probably applicable to anyone"?

Amanda: So, before we actually had commitment to build this new thing, we were looking at other ways that we could sort of encourage and facilitate better content management and better content production.

One of the ways that we thought about getting that message out to our publishers was through our published guidance. And so I guess one of the things that we were advocating was around prioritisation and how do you, if



you have loads and loads and loads of content and you have different departments, or different subject matter experts as we might call them in government, telling you that all of their content is really important and everything has the same value and everything has to be up there because it's super important. Then I am assuming, and this might be an assumption on my part, that most websites will have some kind of analytics programme that they are running, either Google Analytics or another, so the best thing to do is to show comparative traffic and comparative value.

So it's trying to find ways that you can show people, rather than telling. It's showing them that these 10 pages get 90% of the traffic. So it's bringing people on-board with you. That sounds very easy but, in reality, I know it is hard, but if the time is taken to invest in that stakeholder mapping, get the right people in a room, explain the value, explain the value of content design as well, like how content folk can help and how they can benefit what it is that you might want to do from a comms perspective or a policy perspective or whatever it might be.

Robyn: Just keep the logic behind it.

Amanda: How can we tell people what to focus on and what is most important? We can use data to help them with this. Google Analytics alone cannot tell us whether content has been successful or not. Also we have some very, very specialist audiences, very niche content, and it doesn't mean that, just because that content is getting two views a month, that it's not important or valuable. It could be the most important thing for that specialist audience. So we can't use performance data alone. We have to think of another way.

So now we are thinking about how we can pull in different datasets, how they can be used in combination to measure success. So, for example, metadata and capturing things like content intent. What is the purpose of this content? How do you expect it to behave and perform? If you capture all of that at the beginning of the process then, further down the line, we can assess whether or not that has been successful.

And then the final piece in the puzzle is quality; quality data. Using metrics like readability, adherence to a style guide for example, overlaying quality metrics onto the metadata and the performance data can give us a much more rounded view of whether or not different groups of content are performing.

Sushi: Do they always listen to the data though?



Amanda: Well data is not you saying something at the end of the day. You can be quite dispassionate about presenting somebody with data. I know we can always say that, “Oh statistics can always be interpreted –”.

Robyn: “We’ve had enough of experts!”

[Laughter]

Amanda: Mostly, in my experience, people do listen to the data. There will always be, “Oh but –.” People want to talk about their exception. So you have to look at well what is the need here? What do people want from us? And meet the biggest needs that your audience has.

At GDS we work in small agile multidisciplinary teams and so what that means is that we work in an iterative way. So when we have a problem, when there is a challenge, when something comes across our desks, we start with research. So we’ve researched the thing, then we build something or we create hypothesis, and then we test it. We test, test, test, test, test. The reason for that is that we learn from our testing. We don’t have to solve the whole thing in one go. Start small, test it, learn from it, test again, and the cycle continues.

Our work cycle is split up into quarterly objectives. So those multidisciplinary teams are spun up based on the problem, spun up into what we are calling mission teams that work within those objectives. And this is what our roadmap looks like, broken down into quarterly chunks. So each coloured block here, beneath the big objectives, represents a mission team working to a specific objective. All of this is publicly available, you can Google it and you can see for yourself more detail about what the actual teams are working on.

And what that actually means is an overarching framework or new model for content management. We are doing this by exploring how our tools, our publishing applications and our platform capabilities can use data and serve data to make it easier for the departments to manage and transform their content.

Robyn: So you’ve mentioned working in an agile way –

Amanda: yes.

Robyn: Within the digital service. Would you say you’re an advocate for iterative working styles and agile?

Amanda: Absolutely. I just think I’m probably a bit of an evangelist on this front.



Robyn: We've not met anyone who isn't to be fair.

[Laughter]

Amanda: Because I can't overstate the value of learning, testing something, testing things quickly, learning and iterating on what you've learned. Because if you get locked into a way of thinking over a long period of time and you get to the point where you've built something –

Robyn: Yeah.

Amanda: Based on loads of assumptions, you have wasted all of that time and you have wasted all of that effort, and it's very difficult to then go, "Our thinking was wrong at the beginning."

Robyn: Yeah.

Amanda: Because you haven't. You really don't have the time, the money, the resource to do that. Whereas if you start really small and you test and you learn and you iterate, you haven't lost anything. For me, working in sort of multi-disciplinary agile teams, you learn from each other's discipline. It just breaks down those silos and I think it's a much more enriching environment for everyone.

Sushi: What I have noticed is often I see that kind of fixed deadline as being quite interesting as a kind of why things can't happen. We have to get to the fixed deadline, but the common themes that come up that kill agile I've noticed are not knowing how to budget for it and also the deadline.

Robyn: Well it also harks back to the chat about diverse audiences. If you're working with a range of different people with different needs, like working out what those needs are, creating something that is actually going to be useful to them, if you're doing it this way you're far more likely to get it right.

Amanda: Yeah, yeah.

Robyn: While if you're just like, "We're going to guess what you want" –

Amanda: Exactly, yeah. And then you have time to test with people in different settings as well and their different level of digital capability and digital literacy, and then we can tweak accordingly.

Robyn: It's a chance for them to tell you what they actually want from you.

Amanda: Yeah, yeah, exactly.



Robyn: Cool.

Amanda: So my top tips to take away would be gather and use the right data; not rocket science. So performance data, quality data, metadata, using them in the right combination, you'll get a real, rich understanding of your content and it will help you focus on the most important stuff. I can't really say this enough but manage content! As I said, we always talk about content management, but I wonder how many of us really actively manage it? What's your review schedule? What is your update schedule? How often do you refine and improve what you already have? Testing with people as well – Do you have the right thing that people want? Is it in the right format? Can people actually engage with it?

And then, ultimately, measure success. We all want to know when things have worked well and when things are going well, but I think understanding a shared understanding of what success looks like for your content will really help the different competing parts of an organisation. So, taking time to assess your content estate and properly understanding the different types of content that you have will help with that. So success will look different for different content purposes. So some content will have really clear calls to action and that can be a success. Others will be kind of evergreen, long term content, how do you measure the success of that content? So take the time to actually set out what success looks like or all those different content types.

Robyn: So the last question we have is actually just on pair writing. You mentioned it in the talk and I actually did find that there is an article about pair writing on gov.uk –

Amanda: Yeah.

Sushi: Which we will have linked in the dropdown bar over the podcast.

Amanda: Oh great.

Sushi: But if you can talk about your experience of it and how useful it is or?

Amanda: So I think my experience of it has been when we've been trying to understand the complex or difficult subject matter, the way in which, you know, instead of having this kind of like a subject matter expert will give you a piece of content or you and your team will try and rewrite it and edit it and make it and rewrite it in a certain way, and then the subject matter expert getting really, really cross, because, you know, we may have misinterpreted certain aspects but also I think they are probably really cross because nobody really wants their stuff to be completely hacked.



So then what you're doing is the person is getting cross, not necessarily about what you've written but the fact that you have done it that way.

Robyn: Yeah.

Amanda: So then what they want to do, they want to fight for their words and that's not really what they're fighting about. They're fighting about the fact that you've been so presumptuous as to take their thing and completely change it. So to try and mitigate that, having a content person working really closely with the subject expert, by that process of going, "I'm going to ask you about this sentence because it feels a bit long. How would you feel if I cut it up into three things? These are the concepts that are coming out of it. Shall I just write something and see what you think?"

That's just really, really powerful for both people because the person who is writing it, the content person, they know they're not an expert, a technical expert in that area. That gives them more confidence to actually change the words around a lot more and to be maybe a bit braver and a bit bolder with the way they're structuring that content because they have the expert next to them saying, "Oh yeah, yeah, oh actually that's a good idea." Or, "Oh, no, no, no, you absolutely can't change that because if you do that, that means this, this and this." And you're like, "Oh, okay. Great, now I know that."

Robyn: Yeah.

Amanda: Then it's just, again, it's just really that respect and understanding for different kind of professions again.

Sushi: Awesome. Feels like you're basically saying, "Make friends, content people."

[Laughter]

Amanda: Yeah, yeah. I think, definitely, though it's kind of recognising that and saying, "Let's get more people involved with this."

Sushi: Yeah.

Robyn: Yes.

Amanda: But then that will hopefully give you your happy path to use good content.

[Laughter]

Robyn: I love that!



Amanda: You won't have so many people objecting along the way.

Sushi: Yeah, yeah, great.

Robyn: Brilliant. Well since we've circled back round to the happy path, that's a nice place to leave it. Thanks so much for coming in Amanda, it's been great to have you.

Amanda: You're very welcome. Thank you for having me. Cheers.

Robyn: I could really talk to Amanda all day about her content strategy. She clearly is really passionate about the subject which is always brilliant. More than that, she just seems so willing to bring everyone on board and take everyone along with her which is so important when you're working with such vast amounts of people and you're helping to create such varied and – well, you're managing and creating new content as well.

Sushi: And just thinking back to our episode title, Robyn, I've just been thinking that content is the kind of driving force behind many things. You can't create an app, you can't have a good social media channel, you can't have a YouTube channel, you can't have a really good website without some decent content, which is probably why it's so trendy.

Robyn: Absolutely, and it's really interesting listening to the things that both Claudia and Amanda were saying. In some ways, despite the fact that what they were doing, and the audience they were creating content for, and what shape that content was taking, was pretty different, they covered a lot of the same ground in terms of the routes they're taking to ensure that they're creating great quality content that is suitable for the purpose and for the people who are going to find that content really useful.

Sushi: Yeah, the principles of agile really shone through in both of their talks.

Robyn: Hmmm.

Sushi: And in their interviews, yeah.

Robyn: Yeah. Content strategy – it means different things to different people but it's just as essential, and that's why it's the buzzword!

[Laughter]

Robyn: Well, that's it for this episode. We really hope you enjoyed it and that you found it useful.



Sushi: Are there any topics you want to hear us discuss or speakers you would like to hear more from? You can get in touch with us both over Twitter. My handle is @sushi_juggapah.

Robyn: And I'm @robynlewes. If you're enjoying the CharityComms podcast, don't forget to subscribe, share with your colleagues and, go on, give us a five-star rating!

Sushi: Yes!

Robyn: We'll catch you in the next episode. Bye!

Sushi: Bye.

Robyn: The CharityComms podcast is produced by Robyn Lewes and Sushi Juggapah. Don't forget that if you would like to access any of the slides from the presentations referenced in this episode, you can find them under the past events section on the CharityComms website. You can also get in touch with us if you've got any questions or you want to get involved with the podcast, and you can find mine and Sushi's details on the about us section, again on the CharityComms website. Thanks for listening.