

'Digital humans' in government's transformation strategy a welcome world first

Move establishes a new benchmark globally, says Marie Johnson, managing director of the Centre for Digital Business

Marie Johnson (CIO)
27 November, 2018 10:58

f in t e

1 Comment

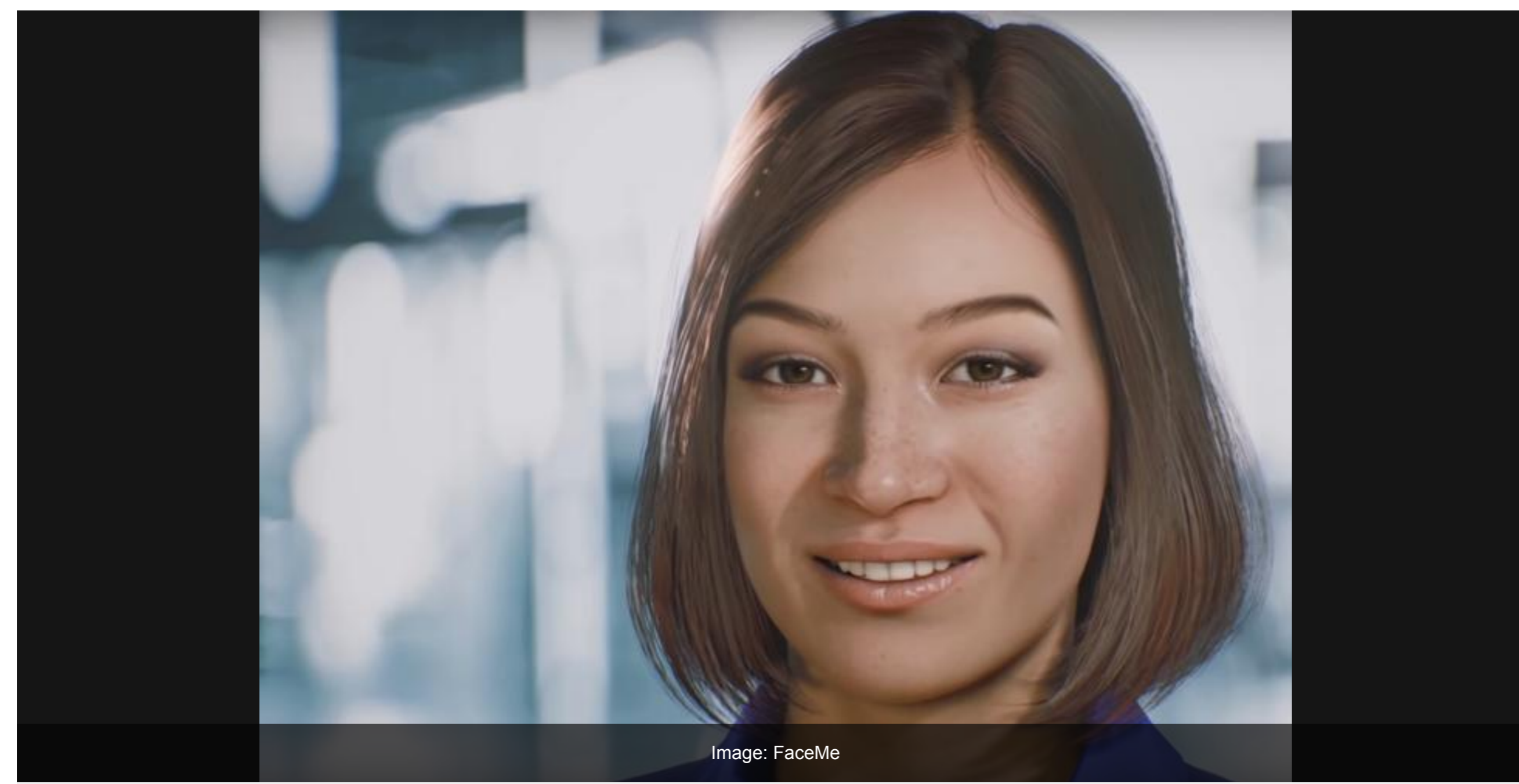


Image: FaceMe

Last week, the Australian Government announced the inclusion of digital humans as part of its Digital Transformation Strategy.

"That means that everyone accessing government services may have access to their own dedicated, personal avatar assistant, that can talk in their language, know their preferences, understand their needs and provide a familiar face to dealing with the government," said Minister for Human Services and Digital Transformation Michael Keenan [last week](#).

For many years, I have been publicly advocating for this, and I know personally how inherently liberating this capability is to a great many people. I am pleased with the Government's recognition of the role that digital humans will play in service delivery.

I have been involved in national and international digital transformation strategies (and their online/eGovernment forerunners) for more than 20 years.

This has involved creating and delivering services with state and local governments, the community, and internationally with other governments. From other perspectives internationally, I was responsible for Microsoft's World Wide Public Services and eGovernment business based at Microsoft's global corporate headquarters in Seattle.

Yes, delivery is hard – especially in a globally connected world where jurisdictions and international bodies can at times be seen as an inconvenience to be overcome or managed in some way – or even an excuse for non-delivery. Delivery is hard: innovation is harder.

So when I look at various government digital strategies, I don't look for the same, I look for the new. Because it is new thinking and ideas that both challenges and breaks through intractable problems caught in the cycle of sameness.

VEEAM BRANDPAGE
Leveraging data and backups to maintain business continuity

More from Veeam >

This brings us to three fundamental points to be understood about the Australian Government Digital Transformation Strategy inclusion of digital humans announced last week.

Firstly, digital humans for everyone. This is big news globally – a world first.

Australia was first with a digital human for service delivery, Nadia. The [digital human capability is available now](#) and will take us into the decades ahead.

Australia doesn't need to look to Estonia or the UK or the UN digital government leader board for validation. Yes, we should always be hungry for the very best ideas and seek these out wherever these arise – even in our own backyard.

Of all the elements of the Government Digital Transformation Strategy, the artificial intelligence (AI) powered digital human public service capability will unlock dimensions of service, transparency and experience not previously possible.

The industrial digital paradigm and automation of the past 20 years assumed that conversations were not affordable and used every effort and rationing and channel to extract the human dimension avoiding face to face conversations.

[READ MORE](#)
CIO50 2018 #22: William Payne, Boral

AI-powered digital humans provide a new and unique way for people to access information and services, through a highly engaging, non-judgemental face-to-face conversational interface – and literally using natural language and every day common words and phrases.

Previous digital transformation strategies and service delivery reform efforts were about removing the human dimension – pushing people away and into forms, apps, websites and over-burdened call-centres and treating people like machines.

At long last, this is a Government Digital Transformation Strategy that brings back the human dimension, recognising the "familiar face" as a new interface to government.

Not even China has a digital human strategy...yet. So Australia, can we please celebrate this?!

The second point is that digital humans are not chat bots. Text chat bots can be problematic because these assume a level of literacy, do not provide the necessary rapport and engagement and in many other ways, are not accessible.

One of the big issues confronting many countries including Australia, is the extent of functional illiteracy across the population – people can only understand basic information and not the complex information provided by banks, government and healthcare organisations.

[READ MORE](#)
CIO50 2018 #4: Dr Zoran Bolevich, NSW Health

This means that people cannot comprehend the material on websites, in forms, brochures and documents: people are often embarrassed to say that they don't understand and cannot read, fearing judgement and stigma. People yearn for information conveyed through conversation and will often call the call centre with basic questions.

Notwithstanding the massive investments being made, the current model is not coping. Simply adding more resources (dollars and head-count) will not address the demand and will not future-proof for the decades ahead.

Globally across various sectors major organisations and governments are deploying digital humans to innovate service models, and to radically enhance the customer experience.

Digital humans are embodied empathetic intelligent digital beings with a co-designed personality, defined roles, a deep body of subject matter knowledge capable of having contextual conversations – not just simple chat chat.

Digital humans like Nadia and the [Digital Human Cardiac Coach](#) – are [not a Siri or Alexa](#) – engaging in chat chat and answering questions on any topic from the general population.

Digital humans as proposed in the Australian Government Digital Transformation Strategy are "bounded systems" co-designed to have contextual conversations. Conversations are interactions through which people gain understanding of a topic or issue, not just a simple "question-and-answer" pair.

[READ MORE](#)
Forrester: Why 2019 is the year of digital and CIO reckoning

To achieve this, co-design is essential – this is not an IT function. And nor is co-design about putting a face over the FAQs or the content management system.

The AI digital human familiar face of government will require the design and co-design of conversations where psychologists not UI experts play a pre-eminent role.

So this is an exciting frontier for Australia to enthusiastically pursue and embrace the opportunities arising from this strategy: new areas of ethics and human rights, including the ethics of opportunity; partnering in global research which is already underway; and new policy dimensions to scale human knowledge for delivery in ways and into areas not previously possible.

The third point to emphasise is that the inclusion of digital humans in the Government's Digital Transformation Strategy, is a profound example of universal design.

The impact of technology innovation on inclusion and accessibility is well known: we humans have always sought to augment our own capabilities. And barriers come down when innovations become mainstream.

Take for example closed captioning, originally implemented to assist people with hearing impairments but a range of forward-looking anti-discrimination and disabilities legislation introduced in the US changed this

[READ MORE](#)
Aussie cyber co's get \$4M boost from AustCyber

Suddenly, everyone who had been shut out from the world of broadcast media could enjoy television programs along with hearing people.

Today, closed captioning features prominently in public environments and public events, accompanies classroom lectures and web content, and even aids ESL students in learning English.

Another example is SMS (now pervasive) but its introduction into Australia was accelerated as a result of the intervention of the Australian Human Rights Commission. This was done so that people with hearing impairment and their families could communicate with one another – with the same access opportunities as the general population – as mobile technology and devices became mainstream.

And the impact of AI digital humans will be even more profound. Where AI differs from previous technology shifts and accessibility innovations, is that it exponentially changes outcomes and directions in human endeavour.

Genuine leadership and a culture of innovation, diversity and respect is fundamental.

The digital human concept was co-designed and driven by people with disability inclusive of people with intellectual disability. Commentary in the media referring to this as "dancing holograms" is patronising and uninformed, effectively ridiculing the phenomenal efforts of people with disability and their role in bringing this to the world.

So in the near future, when digital humans are a commonplace familiar face for dealing with government for everyone, reflect on where this started. Nadia – delivered by the NDIS and co-designed and driven by the most marginalised in our community and disability entrepreneurs who have had to navigate the world differently – is bringing about a level playing field for all.

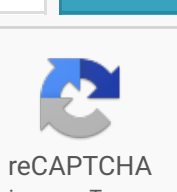
Whatever the outcome of the Australian Federal Election next year, the inclusion of digital humans in the Australian Government Digital Transformation Strategy has established a new benchmark globally.

There is no need to wait – or time to waste.

Join the [CIO Australia group on LinkedIn](#). The group is open to CIOs, IT Directors, COOs, CTOs and senior IT managers.

Join the newsletter!

Email address

I'm not a robot 

Or

Sign in with LinkedIn Sign in with Facebook

Sign up to gain exclusive access to email subscriptions, event invitations, competitions, giveaways, and much more.
Membership is free, and your security and privacy remain protected. View our [privacy policy](#) before signing up.

Tags: [government](#) [NDIS](#) [chatbot](#) [Michael Keenan](#) [virtual assistant](#) [digital human](#) [Nadia](#)

More about: [Australia](#) [Australian Human Rights Commission](#) [Microsoft](#)

1 Comment

1 Comment CIO Australia Disqus' Privacy Policy Login

Recommend Tweet Share Sort by Best

Join the discussion...

LOG IN WITH OR SIGN UP WITH DISQUS

Giridhar Prathap Reddy · 2 years ago

Very very interesting article. I really enjoyed the article. Chatbots will be critical in the future evolution of banking and financial services to provide always on intelligent customer service. They provide for customer support and account inquiry, require minimal setup and streamline and improve the customer operational support process including a substantial reduction in operational and service costs. We at Engati [www.engati.com](#) have started this evolutionary journey. Do visit us and provide us with your valuable feedback as we strive for more mainstream acceptance of this technology of the future.

Reply · Share

Subscribe Add Disqus to your site Do Not Sell My Data DISQUS

Read next

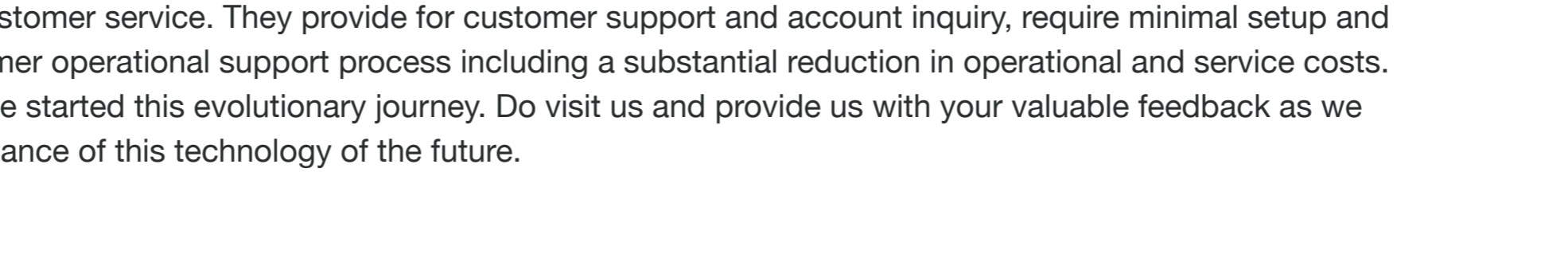
Coles goes on 'digital network' shopping spree

Roger Wahl new John Holland tech boss

Mandy and the mega-merger: Bringing Tabcorp and Tatts' tech and talent together

In pictures: CMOs, CIOs and their role in customer experience

CIO Summit Melbourne 2019



G Suite vs. Office 365: What's the best office suite for business?

Choosing an office suite used to be a no-brainer, but Google's G Suite is now a powerful, feature-filled alternative to Microsoft Office. We break down the pros and cons of each suite to help you decide which is right for your business.

