

Innovative * CIO of the Year

Marie Johnson

This IT expert farewelled Microsoft's head office for the headache of the federal access card initiative, Julian Bajkowski writes.



KATE GERAGHTY

Marie Johnson has only just begun work in her new position as the chief technology architect of the federal government's \$1.1 billion welfare smart card project, yet her vision for the device is crystal clear. She is there to change the public service and to have a positive impact on people's lives.

As the lead designer of the smart card's functional and operational characteristics, Johnson has been charged with delivering an estimated 14 million miniature computers that have the potential to control and to liberate many aspects of daily existence.

For better or for worse – and opinions remain sharply divided – the so-called access card (working name only) is intended to bring about a dramatic reduction in the time-wasting and frustration Australians experience when queuing for Medicare or filling in Centrelink forms – services that account for more than \$100 billion of public payments a year.

HIGH-TECH GENERATION

Johnson has no hesitation in saying that much of the hand-wringing and criticism regarding the card is quite understandable in the context of how major shifts in technology can disrupt

people's expectations and encroach upon comfort zones.

"This is really a generational issue we're looking at in terms of the technology and the processes," she says. "This level of transformation hasn't been attempted since the introduction of the Medicare card."

Johnson is confident that an emerging generation, far more familiar with and comfortable about personal technology and identity management matters, will also carry with it the expectation that the government can quickly and efficiently deliver services through such means. "It's like my daughter going shopping for a pair of shoes and then sending a photo of the shoes to her friends for an opinion," she says. "Technology changes almost every aspect of our lives."

What makes Johnson's story as a technology innovator more compelling is that she chose to leave a highly remunerated job as Microsoft's global public sector strategist – and this was only a year after being headhunted by the software behemoth – to return to what many see as a thankless and risky task.

"I went to Microsoft to bring to the strategy table in Redmond an understanding of the [public sector] customer – and how that informs

Microsoft in a global context," she says. And while there has been plenty of conjecture in Canberra's ever-churning political rumour mill about why she cut short her tenure in Redmond in the United States, she says she chose to return to Australia in order to be able to take better care of a family member.

"Microsoft was enormously valuable in giving me an understanding of how private-sector technology organisations operate and their perspective on global events," she says in a matter-of-fact way. "There's no getting away from the fact that it's a unique and highly valuable experience that I'm bringing back to this role. The life-changing events – well, you just deal with them."

She applies that same straightforward vision to assessing the impact of technological innovation on the public, understanding that citizens are often compelled to deal with it, without being given any choice.

"Businesses and citizens won't go online simply for the pleasure of doing business with government," she says. "We may think we have this great value proposition, but you have to think about it very seriously in terms of what it means to the end customer. That's the reality check I brought to Microsoft."

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This philosophy was also famously brought to bear at the Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources where she created one of the notable successes of the government's forays into e-commerce: the business entry point. It has collected accolades from entities as diverse as the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and the United Nations.

CENTRALISED INTERACTIONS

The site, www.business.gov.au, and its web-based functions centralised many of the interactions that businesses need to conduct with government, from permits and online applications to the issuance of Australian Business Numbers and digital certificates for secure transactions. What is less well-known is that while pushing out these public interface changes between 2001 and 2005, Johnson was also helping to start a quiet revolution by

forging a path away from big-bang technology outsourcing to a selective sourcing strategy. While such approaches are now accepted as best practice by the public service (and its auditors), this was certainly not the case at the time as large technology service vendors fought at both political and bureaucratic levels to keep their lucrative multi-agency contracts alive.

Those who worked with Johnson during that period pay credit to her ability to manage the expectations of her superiors and suppliers. "She thrives on change," one Canberra adviser says. "She's a born negotiator. The one thing she managed to do above all others was to make sure people's self-respect was left intact – even if she was shaking them out. That can be difficult when people are lobbying to have you removed, but it goes to the heart of how you manage change."

Johnson attributes this desire to humanise the machinery of government, which she describes

as a personal passion for public service, as arising from the values instilled in her by her working-class parents. "My mother was a nurse; my father worked in the railways for 40 years and so did his father," she says. "It's a belief I have about the value of public service in society – that technology can transform services to deliver benefit to the customer." ■

CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

- * Chief technology architect, Office of Access Card, Department of Human Services.
- * Worldwide executive director, public services and e-government, Microsoft, United States.
- * CIO, Department of Industry, Tourism and Resources.
- * Manager electronic business, State Revenue Office of Victoria.
- * Intelligence and analysis roles at National Crime Authority and Department of Defence.
- * MBA from Melbourne Business School and senior executive program studies at Harvard.