

From good to great & how tech influences the end result

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BRADLEY HOWARD, ENDAVA HOST (BH): Hello, everyone. I'm Bradley Howard, and I'm happy to welcome you to the latest episode of Tech Reimagined. I'm thrilled to have Meri Williams as our guest today. A CTO, she's been responsible for scaling up some of the world's biggest organizations. You might not have heard her name, but you'll definitely have seen some of the evidence for brilliant work with industry leaders such as Monzo, Procter & Gamble and Marks and Spencers. Meri, welcome to our podcast. Can you tell us more about your background?

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MERI WILLIAMS – CTO, GEEK, MANAGER (MW): Thanks so much for having me. As you mentioned, I've been a technology leader and in more recent years CTO at a number of a number of different orgs. But 10 years at P&G, then the Government Digital Service, then Vodafone, M & S, Monzo and now at Helix, which is a patient focused AI startup, that uses AI to find treatments for rare diseases. So as someone with a rare disease myself, it's a mission that really appealed to me. I also have the benefits of getting involved with a number of organisations through a VC called Kindred, I'm a tech advisor for them, and I help them assess possible investments, but also help grow the companies in the portfolio. And I'm also part of Lead Dev, which is a leadership and technology conference where we try and focus on levelling people up from the people, tech and tools point of view in the broader industry.

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BH: It certainly sounds like you keep yourself busy through all those roles. So in today's episode, we're going to be talking about how technology influences the end result in businesses. So let's dive straight in. So you've had an array of interesting positions over the years in different industries. What is it that piques your interest in an organisation and makes you want to transform it?

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MW: I think there being the combination of people realising something has to change. So trying to make change happen where people aren't even aware of the impetus for it or the danger that they're facing is just, you know, shouting into the wind, shall we say, so I like the kind of opportunities where they already know something's got to give, and they're genuinely open to doing that in an interesting way. So one of the great things about the GovUK journey was Martha Lane Fox was acting as a sort of advisor for the government at the time and had written this brilliant white paper where she said we needed revolution, not evolution in public services. She was just like, trying to evolve from where we are right now is never going to work. We have to take a different approach. And so it was very freeing in some ways. You know, I joined at a point where Tom Lewis Moore had done a fantastic job. He put together a team, they built the alpha. They'd shown that they could build great things for government needs in this agile, modern approach that, you know, good design is worth investing in, that accessibility mattered, that they could not only make things better for citizens, but also for the civil servants who were running those services that could make things better for everyone. And I think joining with us, there's that kind of opportunity is great, but also just anywhere that tech is not yet fully utilised. I think people tend to think of tech as this big thing off to the side, and I view it more like, you know, it's just our version of the industrial revolution, right? Like what the industrial revolution did for manufacturing, tech is doing for knowledge work. And we're just the latest wave of that, in my view.

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BH: In your view, what is the difference between a good organisation and a great one?

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MW: How sustainable their achievement is. So I think it's one thing to reach a peak, and it's another to make sure that you've got the next generation of leaders coming up. You've got the infrastructure that you can sustain that performance over time, whether that's in people terms and delivery times, in growth terms. One of the when I was at P&G, one of the big aspirations of P&G was to be the company with the most years in a row of double digit growth and having worked as startups where they're like, they're after the hockey stick graph, right? So, you know, 10 or 11 per cent growth is not what a VC backed startup is looking for, but a 140 year old business getting 10 plus per cent growth year on year on year on year. Like, that's immense. And so that's one of the things that I find interesting, I suppose, is like, how do you not just achieve something, but how do you create the structure that makes that ongoing achievement possible?

How do you not just create a set of, you know, a great one-off executive team? How do you have the next generation coming up or make sure that you're an attractive place for other leaders to join and so, so know that you're not going to fall apart when this particular set of leaders move on to something else or, you know, the CEO moving out is such a big deal at some companies and that worries me sometimes. I look at them, I'm like, Well, if the CEO makes that big a difference to your success or failure, then structurally there's something challenging here for this, for this business.

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BH: That was Jim Collins' book, wasn't it? And he talks about subsequent CEOs being able to continue that amazing growth. I guess if you look at Microsoft, they'll be a good example. I've always thought that sports, especially football teams in the UK, wouldn't be classified as great teams would they? Because very few can achieve that consistent success when the manager leaves.

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MW: Whereas fascinatingly, the All Blacks are in rugby are actually a very interesting case study of that because they have had international success through a very wide range of coaches, of managers. The culture and ethos of the all-Black team seems to transcend whoever the current leaders are, and they have had a couple of players who've been very, very long running, you know, Sonny Bill. You know, there's definitely some individuals who've had a big effect there. But the all-Black team is a thing that exists in itself, that people then join, right? Where some teams are just a collection of individuals, that they're a real team. I find them a fascinating example, even though I'm South African, and so they are not my number one team. But I, you know, in true antipodean fashion, I will I will support them if they're beating Australia, I'll support anybody if they're beating Australia. Let's be honest.

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BH: I have visions of people trying to burn this podcast in some shape or form.

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MW: 3 I mean, Aussies are all just too busy at the barbie anyway, so they they're pretty laid back, which is a good thing from a country where literally everything that moves can kill you. I think you've got to be laid back to survive into adulthood there.

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BH: I refer everyone back to our diversity and inclusion podcast that we've been recording. So moving on though, do you think that technology has a part to play in good and great companies?

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MW: Yes, but again, I think my attitude to it is that it's just - it's just our latest version of the Industrial Revolution, our latest tools. I remember there being a point where in the UK they were saying they were going to, they were going to put more people through an IT GCSE, and there was a quote, that was a little condescending, but it was somebody going like, 'This is like if you had a shortage of surgeons and you said, we're going to train more nurses.' It's not that more nurses aren't valuable, it's not that IT GCSE isn't useful, but it doesn't teach the same things as if you created a whole new generation of surgeons, and I think we're not far away from the point where. Not being able to - whether it's code or whether it's some other form of like, tell computers, what to do - will be like being able to read without being able to write.

I think we're just increasingly getting to the point where tech is such a core part of what we deliver and how we deliver that we have to demystify it for everyone to make it just another tool that people use, and of course, you know, there's a range of tools and services, there's a range of vehicles, and sometimes you need special training. Sometimes the basic license you've got gives you permission to drive all sorts of interesting things, and being more specific about what people need and how we how we equip them, I think is important.

But also, like one thing tech really can do is it can help people focus on what matters and focus humans on what they are really great at. Like, humans aren't great at super repetitive, you know, do it exactly the same way every time type tasks, but you know what, robots are great with that. So let's move work to robots that's well suited to them, but then move work to humans that is actually fulfilling for them. I think, you know, there's people who view automation work or similar as like stealing jobs and that kind of thing. I think, I think in a great company, often that kind of investment in automation or in technology is about freeing people up for work that they are going to enjoy more, going to be better at going to find more fulfilling and not necessarily just about, you know, replacing people with robots or cranes or machines or whatever else. But that's a - let's not get into whether late stage capitalism is a problem in itself. That's beyond the scope of this. I think people trying to resist technological change just because it threatens people's livelihoods or whatever else, like you can't hold back the ocean forever. Somebody is going to move any work that is possible to be moved, to robots and automation. Someone's going to do it. So we have to sort of embrace that reality and then make sure we look after people, that we do have jobs that are, you know, valuable and fulfilling and we don't end up with an ever widening gulf between, you know, the people programming the robots and the people who used to be doing the work of those of those robots.

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BH: Yeah, and this brings us on really nicely into the next question. So for many tech companies, there's currently a focus on the wider impacts that a company has and to ensure that it has a positive one on society and also the environment as well. So what's your view of tech for good?

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MW: I'm pleased to see it in the discourse so much more, and I think it should be part of how we evaluate things. I there's a famous story about how some of the competitors to Ford in the early years objected to him treating employees so well because they said, we're publicly traded companies, we have to do what's right for our shareholders and so we can't be so nice to our employees as he is. He's like breaking the rules by being so - by treating his employees so well, just because he's privately held or something along these lines. I suppose maybe it's a bit hippie of me, but I don't think that in the long run, things that are really bad for people are really good for organisations.

So like long term, very few corporations are going to do well out of us destroying the planet. So maybe not destroying the planet should be a priority and we should be focused on it. I think having that broader range of factors taken into account in decisions is very positive. I think some of those changes you're only going to get when it's legislated or you're only going to get it wholesale when it's enforced by some outside party. But hopefully we can swing the balance towards it being sort of commercially smart to do good, as well as right to do good over time.

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BH: But we're also on the very beginning of the – of discussing the ethics around personal data and what is right and what isn't going to be sustainable for the future as well. Because we've known that a lot of the social networks have got a lot of data about us and we know that for a long time. But now we're really starting to discuss the ethics. I'm not saying that whether something is right or wrong, I don't think it's that clear cut. But what's your view on that?

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MW: I mean, I think some of the revelations about the extent to which Facebook is in particular, this, you know, there's been some exposes recently, people who have left the company who've published data and shared information. But I don't think anybody would have started from a blank piece of paper and designed a situation where a single company can literally massively influence the outcome of what are meant to be democratic elections. Nobody would start with a blank piece of paper and be like, yes, that's the world we want to design.

You know, I don't think that - I don't think Facebook maliciously got themselves into that situation, but the reality of it is that were there and there was a very interesting analysis I read a few years ago now that said maybe this belief we have that technology companies can scale in a non-linear fashion so they can get bigger and bigger without their workforce having to get bigger and bigger at the same rate? Maybe we're just wrong.

Maybe what we're missing is that Facebook needed to have a load of content and editing folks in there as well. If they'd had to staff themselves the way that newspapers do, they would not scale in this way because it would have been too expensive too. I think there's some interesting discourse about what you can neglect and what it's OK to neglect and not neglect in the same way. You know, you don't have to go back very far in history, even in Europe, to find times where manufacturing plants were doing terrible things and, you know, dumping toxic waste and all that good stuff.

You know, now it's unthinkable. I think those changes to make the system reject the entire - the whole reject things that are bad. It is worth doing. I love the Nudge book about the kind of

economic theory around how you frame choices. You know, if you opt everybody into organ donation, you make it really easy to opt out. So if somebody does object for any reason, whether it's, you know, religious or anything else, but just to even the majority people say that they support organ donation, the majority people don't get around to proactively signing up for it. But if you opt people in by default, you end up with a lot more lives being saved.

So objectively, probably a good thing. So it's about how you frame the question. I think having better debates about what some of those defaults are, what the exceptions are, what is normal, is a lot what we've got the opportunity to assess right now. You know, one of the sad things is, sadly tech has normalised things being free, but they're not free. What's being sold is you. What's being sold is your data and I don't think we've equipped people well to - if you're not a technologist you are probably missing some of that context. Some of the understanding, some of the risk assessment that probably everybody should be able to do like, you know, we talk about schools not teaching budgeting. Do we think schools are teaching people to worry about how their information is being gathered and sold on?

Pretty sure that's not on the curriculum anywhere and probably is a pretty essential life skill at this point. Sorry, I'm rambling a little bit, but I think it's a very, very interesting area and the fact that most countries don't have a legislative framework or a government framework that can stay ahead of technological change, or even react to it in a timely manner, is definitely contributing to some of the challenges that we're seeing. If we value democracy and we value people being able to choose their leaders and so on, like, you can't not deal with some of these things. If those things are important to us as a culture and as a world, then they're being threatened with it, whether we want them to be or not. So our only choice is whether to acknowledge and act rather than whether to - we can't stop it happening. We can just choose what we do about it.

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BH: Yeah. I mean, you cited a couple of analogies before about how people used to be treated in manufacturing plants and stuff and, you know, toxic waste, etc. The way that those industries changed was, first of all, by legal means, you know, through a court case, etc, which became law, which really fundamentally changed the practices. And now those businesses and those industries want to behave better because it's good for publicity and the wider environment. I think with technology companies, it's not so clear cut. There are lots of companies that want to collect some data in order to analyse it, whether that's, I know a bank who wants to create some really good spending tools for your current accounts, et cetera, based on how you, how you buy goods, etc. There's a really fine line. It's a really gray area to say, that's successful and that's not, and right now, in 2021. We're starting to make those decisions about what's acceptable within those businesses, and social media as well.

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MW: Yeah, I mean, I think sadly for a lot of people in IT and in engineering and tech, our experience of GDPR coming in was mostly about like, the cookie banners. That was not ideal, right? Because actually, when you read the GDPR, a lot of it's really good. It's just going like, you shouldn't take people's data without them knowing. They should, they should know what you're going to do with it and be able to give informed granular consent, it basically means like, I should be able to say yes to some of it, but not all of it if I choose, and that you definitely can't sell it on to a third party without me knowing about it, right? Like wildly oversimplifying here. But I think in how caught up we got in, you know, changing preference centres and making sure that our emails were compliant. We missed it.

Like some of these things can be really positive, your customers who want to hear from you, are much less annoyed by the emails that you send and therefore much more likely to buy stuff from

you, right? Like it doesn't all have to be have to be bad. I think some of the some of the more modern frameworks are quite good at going, you know what, analysing your current account transactions, so we can give you good, good advice that can be done in a way that doesn't sell any of your data to anyone else. It can be done in a way that is quite, you know, quite boxed in and well-defined.

Maybe you do get a benefit from the fact that that organisation has visibility on a load of other people's stuff. But a lot of time, just like predicting what you're going to do based on what you already did is the most valuable thing. So I think when you get into the detail, it is much clearer which things are - there are definitely gray areas, but like, people sometimes want to talk about this in a way that 'it's too complex to even engage with', and it's like, no a load of it's really not that difficult to engage with. We just need to be real about the fact that there's value to these things, and there's the risk of harm.

So one of the best talks I ever attended on data privacy was at the Open Data Institute. It's a fantastic organization, does just really amazing work and they were talking about, well at the time, net neutrality and those kind of things. I'm like, well, you know what? Even metadata can be very telling, right? So the example they gave was if somebody - you know that they received a phone call and you look up what the number was and it was from their doctor. They then go online, they search for HIV and AIDS, and then they search for life expectancy and then they search for treatments. Now you have not got their medical record, but that metadata of what phone calls they had and what searches they did or websites they visited tells you a lot about what they're going through at that moment. You can infer a lot from it.

That was one of the examples like just showing, even metadata you can learn a lot from and we need to be sure whether that's information that people would want to share, whether it's something that they want to do. Then the other thing that's fascinating when you get into data and privacy is anonymisation and re-identification. So I mentioned before, I've got a rare disease, one in 50000 people. There's not 50000 people in my postcode. So if you know I have that disease and you know my postcode, and you have a data set that has a load of information about people in that postcode. It includes a link that one of those people has that disease, you can identify me as a human very easily from that information. So the risk of, you know, you take out all of the names and names and identifiers, but can somebody work out who it is again, quite easily. That's a sort of angle of attack that security professionals think about a lot and social engineers think about a lot. But a lot of the folks who are amassing data and doing stuff with it, they're not necessarily going well, what's the - what's the attack vector here, where someone re-identifies an individual? Have we guarded against that effectively?

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BH: That was absolutely fascinating, Meri. Thank you so much for joining us on the podcast. It was amazing to get your chance on the perspective of how tech influences so much that goes on in our day to day lives and also the businesses we work in. To all of our listeners, if you like today's topic, please show us some love and hit that subscribe button. Please remember to tune in next week for the latest episode of the podcast. If you have any further questions or you'd like to reach out for any other comment, then you can drop us a line at endava.com or message us on social media. I'm Bradley Howard. This is Tech Reimagined. Until next time.