

“What I’ve seen and why you need it”

Martin Francis Campbell, Chief Information Officer, World Vision UK

“What is digital transformation?” Martin Campbell asked the conference audience. “Let’s unpack it a bit. Many of us will be familiar with the definition of digital that’s been adopted by the Charity Digital Code and various other things which have been published over the last two years, around what digital is and isn’t. And many of our colleagues will start from the point of view that the digital revolution is just about adding an increased layer of complexity and an increase in their costs.”

But he agreed with the definition provided by Tom Loosemore, co-founder of the Government Digital Service, that “digital is about applying the culture, practices, business models and technologies of the internet era to meet people’s raised expectations”.

“So we’re not talking about digital transformation, we’re talking about transformation.”

He said one of the first things you need to reconcile before embarking on any transformation project is what you want to achieve with how much you have to invest in it, be that time, money or other resources. He recalled a mid-sized medical charity he pitched to when he ran his own digital agency, who said they “wanted to be the Amazon of their sector”, before revealing they had a budget of £10,000 to spend on the work.

Meanwhile, many large organisations allow their transformation projects to be stalled by “political hot potatoes”, where they pass the buck or blame others for hold-ups or failures. It’s much harder to hide behind these in a small organisation, Campbell said. But these blockers can be tackled; he recalled another transformation project he led for a large children’s charity, where people insisted that all the technology projects on a list of several dozen were still active, even though some had not made any progress for weeks or months. But when he labelled those that had stalled as “blocked”, suddenly people got defensive and began showing interest in them again.

“If the political hot potato goes off the table, there is a massive increase in accountability.”

The secret, he suggested, is to “switch from activity thinking to results thinking. And make projects visible from a single source of truth.”

When things are visible to everybody it completely changes people’s behaviour, he said. It not only boosts accountability, it improves quality control, because when people can see that something is going wrong or falling behind, everybody rallies round to try to rescue it.

“If you want accountability, you have to have the ability to count,” he told delegates. “That sounds blindingly obvious, but it is completely ignored by the vast majority of our sector.”

He said that in his experience, charities tend to make decisions based on the political opinions of the leadership team, not on data. “Decisions are not based on what works, they are based on what we believe will work. And let’s face it, if we look at the results of our sector as a whole, we cannot have the confidence that this is a good way to go.”

His final anecdote was from his own charity, World Vision UK, which had built a dashboard to track and demonstrate its performance, but which had over 100 distinct numbers on it. Its architects said they would bring it to life by creating a narrative around the numbers.

“But that’s not how a dashboard works,” said Campbell. “The dashboard of my car has very few numbers on it. And everybody knows what those numbers are. If I get pulled over by a policeman and he tells me I was doing 86mph in a 30mph zone, then I don’t get to create a narrative around

those numbers. We already know what success and failure looks like because we've agreed it in advance, and we know that 86 is unacceptable. We should be accountable to the numbers."

He wrapped up by sharing an "unpleasant truth about our sector" from a survey carried out recently on the back of the launch of the Charity Digital Code. In this survey, 75 per cent of respondents said their organisations wanted to do digital transformation, and around half of those said they knew what they were doing in order to achieve it. But the most worrying response was that only a quarter said they had "more than just a few" people in the organisation with the digital skills to do it.

"So as a sector we are relying on a very small group, and you probably are in that group," he told delegates. "So I would definitely encourage you to take the idea of accountability and the idea of being able to measure what's actually going on in real time, share those results with colleagues and then have a conversation with those colleagues where you say, 'we've improved this from x to y, what have you done this quarter?'"

"Start to get the idea of being accountable to the numbers and really being able to share and point to what is going on in our organisations. Because the ability to count is the key to digital culture."