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Digital Skills for Health and Care Professions

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1. TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	1
2. The 'Reflective Loop'	2
3. Experience.....	2
4. Reflective Observation.....	3
5. Action	4
6. Conclusion.....	5
7. REFERENCES	6

2. The 'Reflective Loop'

During this module we have analysed the digital strategies of our organisations, yet I could not do that as Digital Health and Care Wales (DHCW), that is the organisation I work for, does not have a published digital strategy yet. So instead, I have analysed the “2021-2022 Plan” (Digital Health and Care Wales, 2021).

In the present document I reflect on my experience evidencing the implementation of the Plan, based on the guidance for a reflective practice known as the ‘ERA cycle’ (Jasper, 2013). ERA stands for Experience, Reflection, Action; it was described by Melanie Jasper in 2013 and it shows great correlation to the ‘Kolb’s cycle’ of reflective practice (Kolb, 1984).

3. Experience

I started working in DHCW in late 2021, when this Plan had already been set out, in the year that DHCW had switched from being NHS Wales Informatics Service (NWIS) under the umbrella of Velindre NHS Trust, to become a special health authority. I arrived at an organisation that was mutating, and at the same time continued to function under its old, engrained habits. When entering the organisation, I would have never said, without the prior knowledge, that it was *new*.

Internal and external stakeholders are addressed in the Plan; these were all known, historical stakeholders. Regarding its staff, the vast majority already knew each other. Even more, some had already been through a prior restructure of the organisation with a change in name and authorities some 20 years prior. Hence, the overwhelming feeling was not that of a fresh start, except for me.

The relevant stakeholders mentioned in the Plan include firstly Welsh Government (as the propulsor of DHCW and its aim) and its dependency, Public Health Wales. Secondly, the organisation’s Board, including the CEO and its directors, continuing with its staff from whom a large proportion corresponds to those working in the programmes and projects that DHCW handles, and those involved in the assurance process. To conclude, the ‘recipients’ of the deliverables are also addressed: the end-users of the systems working in health boards (HBs), local organisations, primary care and community, and the citizens of Wales.

DHCW’s birth was during the COVID-19 pandemic, in the midst of lockdowns and remote working. One of the strongest aspects of DHCW in this context was that its workforce could easily work remotely, as the majority of the required equipment was already in their possession. Even new starters like me had easy access to anything we required to work from home from the first day. However, the distance and getting to know the different teams in this environment was not easy. It took me a very

long time to get to know most of the people I needed to work with, and even a longer time to build a relationship with them. The Plan was not a central aspect of the process of being onboarded, and there was no mention of it when being introduced to the various portfolio teams. Not only did I never come across it, but I also believe I never would have found it if I had not actively looked for it for this assignment.

Each of the portfolios that are described in the Plan is handled by a set of different teams who meet at different intervals, and project managers (PMs) have the autonomy to determine invitees and agendas. A siloed way of working was – unwittingly – promoted, with teams crossing each other depending almost solely on the PMs intentions; the one instance of ‘overarching’ assurance that takes place is at the Welsh Informatics Assurance Group (WIAG) meetings, where a variety of groups coalesce. This siloed way of working is further deepened by the absence of a Strategy and the poor reach of the above-mentioned Plan.

Once I started engaging with the teams, and paying attention to outside comments on what we were delivering, I realised how rooted the shortcomings of the communication of the vision were and the scarcity of joined-up work that the lack of common goals created. I evidenced that well intentioned and hard-working employees were diverging in their ideas on how to best deliver their work because of this, and the inconveniences it produced, affecting timescales of deliveries and adoption of our systems by the end users.

4. Reflective Observation

My time working in DHCW has been short. Still, I have realised that the main issues are in communication and the lack of a clear global view embedded in the culture to act as the guiding principle to all workstreams. This, in turn, has created groups attempting to deliver their workstream as a silo, with consensus across multidisciplinary teams being labelled as belonging in ‘the too-hard box’.

Innovation and agreement have been halted by the lack of a well demarcated path in conjunction with remote working preventing conversations to spark easily and requiring actively seeking other personnel in different areas. Even resentment between teams sprung as a consequence of end users complaining about the deficiency in the service being provided, causing teams to blame each other for the flaws. That *blame culture* prevents further improvement and diminishes collaboration. The discomfort is furthered by the shortage of joined-up work and connection of workstreams. This is evident in the ways of working within the organisation and the difficulties to come together in one view, with no effective communication leading to a fractured approach to delivery.

Discontent also flows from the users of the systems who demand more participation, as they are rarely involved in the process of design and their requests for change (RFCs) take too long to be processed. Change is not readily visible. If involved, it is in isolated meetings at subject matter expert (SME) groups, who are consulted but not shown progress in between developments.

At all stages, there is a deficient inclusion of internal and external participants. Engagement should be both ways, from top to bottom and bottom to top as attempting to force delivery and mandating work without explanation or listening to the difficulties and challenges being faced leads to frustration which I have experienced and heard from others. Safe spaces for communication either do not exist or are not apparent or shared. Leadership should be proactive and seek feedback. In blame culture, people tend to stop speaking up and start doing so behind backs, reducing efficiency in work, and impoverishing the work environment even further. I have frequently evidenced distrust arising.

A whole process analysis and understanding of which are the guiding principles is needed to avoid focusing on the leaf if the trunk is not firm. Leadership needs to acknowledge the problems to start tackling them, having an open mind and willingness to listen to the requests that are being made. This includes end users, including the citizens of Wales, who we are serving.

I believe in the importance of having strategic and involved management with an aerial view that can simplify the process and raise awareness of the developments to avoid duplication of work. Whenever sessions that transverse the different workstreams occur the discussion become more active as opposed to the siloed group session that only foster creative thinking within the boundaries that are already in place.

One wonders why do people stay if they are so unhappy with the way the organisation functions. There are different motivations, but mostly what I have heard and experienced is the feeling that what each is doing is adding value and 'in the right direction' hoping that somebody will take the reins and lead the way.

5. Action

In this panorama, what can be done? To begin with, common fertile ground needs to be identified to lay the grounds of collaborative work. A universal truth that is inclusive of all the disparate mindsets should be identified to unite them. For DHCW, the focus could shift from service delivery to a patient-centred approach.

I believe that the first step in lieu of union and to break the current cycles, is to delineate the strategy and to promote it. There is a clear need to break the internal resistance, change the culture.

The organisation can modify its name, but to achieve real change the transformation needs to come from within, deep in the roots of how things are done. A clear set of common goals and realistic expectations are required to deliver not only a great product and service, but also to be able to present the organisation in a better light.

Having a clear, simple set of standards that delineate the framework in which all the programmes and portfolios need to be delivered should improve decision making. Communication and engagement with the staff to get feedback on the challenges they are facing is required so that the strategy can address these difficulties and be relevant to those involved. A strategy is a top-down set of mandates, but it can only be effective if the bottom-up feedback has been considered.

Actively involving everyone in participation, allowing for comments to flow and reach management and promoting anonymous contributions and moving away from the blame culture by permitting free expression is known to produce the best results, as people feel interpellated and part of the process when their thoughts are considered. As a consequence, employees who feel heard, would be more willing to embrace change.

Once produced, the strategy needs to be shared via as many channels as possible like intranet, line management introducing discussion about it, office meetings to address specific topics, internal communication channels, and engagement with external stakeholders. We require a more open approach not only in the way we handle data and open platforms, but also in the way we interact with all the stakeholders.

At project level, forming SME groups for the different projects may ensure that a variety of end users are more comfortable with the product being delivered and more willing to bridge the gap between the HBs and local organisations for a 'greater good'. As well, inter-disciplinary groups inside the organisation should be established to comprehend where the challenges lie in the delivery of each product and to create active participation across the organisation, fostering teamwork with a view to the common goal.

6. Conclusion

All in all, the stakeholders need a clear roadmap to adhere to. Communication requires improvement to strengthen relationships and bring the organisation to work as one team, all maintaining the appropriate governance to ensure that the different portfolios comply with the minimum set of requirements that make deliveries safe for use.

7. REFERENCES

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