**Public Sector Future podcast**

**Detail: Episode 18 -- Abhishek Singh**

**Olivia Neal [host]**

**[Music]**

**Abhishek Singh [guest]** MD & CEO Digital India Corporation (DIC) at Govt of India (which leads the digital transformation of the Indian Govt)

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Hello and welcome to Public Sector Future. This is a show for anyone who cares about using digital approaches in the public sector to deliver better outcomes. I’m your host, Olivia Neal, and together we explore stories from around the world, where public servants have been successful at delivering change.

I’m really excited about today’s episode, where we’re joined by Shri Abishek Singh. Abishek is CEO of MyGov which is the national online Government portal for India. He also leads India's National e-Governance Division, and the Digital India Corporation. In these roles he’s responsible for projects supporting 1.4bn people. So, when we’re thinking about digital transformation at scale, there’s really no-one better to talk to. In fact, Abishek had so many great insights, what we’ve decided to do is to break this episode into two parts.

Today in part one, we’re going to learn about the scale and scope of his role, and the reach of MyGov India, we’re going to learn about how he’s reaching people where they are to build engagement, and how this approach has supported COVID responses. We also going to hear about how the structure of Digital India has allowed new talent and partnerships to drive forward digital transformation in the government.

Without further ado, Shri Abishek Singh, welcome to the show

**ABHISHEK SINGH:** Thank you. Thank you. It’s a pleasure to be here.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** I could just ask you to start off by introducing yourself to our audience and telling them a little bit about what is your role?

**ABHISHEK SINGH:** Well, I’m Abhishek Singh and I’m a career civil servant, like in government of India we call them the Indian administrative services. And presently, I’m working as the chief executive officer of MyGov in Ministry of Electronics and IT.

MyGov is a citizen engagement platform of government of India, which allows citizens to contribute to policy discussions, to contribute their ideas and positions with regard to what they want from the government. As also, it does a lot of information dissemination to the citizens. It demystifies what the government does and explains in layman’s terms the policies or the schemes or the projects the government is implementing, why it is implemented, in what ways citizens can contribute to that. So that creates a two-way bridge between citizen and government.

I also have an additional role as president and CEO of the National eGovernance Division and the MD and CEO of the Digital India Corporation. That makes me kind of the head of Digital India program in India and the Digital India projects, each of our platform reaches to the billion-plus people that we have in India. So that makes the size and impact a bit challenging.

At the same time, we also have another challenge that India is a very diverse country. In many ways, you can see India like the European Union, with multiple languages, multiple cultures. We have 22 official languages. So when we design the e-service, digital inclusion becomes a big issue, so that way, my role there leads to not only design projects for e-delivery of services, but also take it from the point of view of the citizens

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Gosh, this is an absolutely huge role. So, the MyGov platform where you’re acting is that bridge and an interlocutor between citizens and the other government departments. And then there’s much broader projects which really are serving over a billion people in 22 official languages. That’s a huge undertaking. So, when you took on this role, which I think was about two and a half years ago, how did you look at this portfolio and think about your priorities? How did you decide where to focus and how to start?

**ABHISHEK SINGH:** If I’m going back to October 2019 when I joined, at that point of time, the platform was very robust, it was growing, but we found that the engagement on the social media platforms, we were finding a change. And we found that, people were preferring to engage with us on various social media platforms, rather than coming to our app or to our portal.

Then we increased our presence on all the platforms, and therein realized that India is a very young country. The population, the demographic profile says that the number of people below 35 is almost 70% of our population.

And therein we found that there was a shift that was happening even on the social media platforms. the engagement on the video platform, especially with YouTube or Instagram, was much more than the other traditional social media platforms like Twitter or Facebook. So then we reoriented our strategy to reach out to people with shorter video clips, by clearing communications, by engaging with people, by making a two-way communication possible.

So that was in the beginning, and that was when I joined. But within four or five months, COVID struck and then our role transformed because then we started providing communication support for COVID communication through Ministry of Health and Family Welfare, and then the entire focus went on there.

And as we all know, with COVID, we got a huge communication challenge to begin with because when we spoke to the health experts and they said that this a virus in which you remain asymptomatic for almost two weeks, like you may be infected, but you won’t even know. So if you go back to February 2020 and March 2020, this was something that was difficult to explain to people, that if you are not feeling sick, why should you stay at home? So then we started to renew the communication at finally trying to explain them.

Then of course, these words have become part of the lexicon today. But March 2020 and February 2020, when we were brainstorming, when we had to explain the word quarantine, like how do we explain the word quarantine? How do we communicate it? Because there was no equivalent words in Indian languages. So then we, of course, took very innovative ways of making short videos, making clips, and getting influencers and all to do that.

So that became the prime focus during 2020, and of course ‘21, we started pushing the vaccination drive because again, the challenge of addressing vaccine hesitancy and all became a prime focus.

And at the same time, when we had challenges like vaccinating a billion people and then keeping track of them and having multiple vaccines with multiple duration difference, like one vaccine you take the second dose after 84 days, one vaccine you get after 28 days, and you have to ensure that everybody gets the two doses.

With the challenges of vaccinating a billion-plus people with multiple vaccines, keeping track of them, ensuring that everybody comes back for the second dose, it required to build up a digital platform. So that was also kind of built in record time.

And today, we are one of those countries which have a robust system of not only tracking vaccination, issuing vaccination certificates, but also really verifying. And then it was built on open, interoperable platform. We allowed open APIs, so that anybody could verify the vaccination status of anyone, so delivery boys and e-commerce operators, they could use that very easily.

So those were the kind of prime focus areas in the last two and a half years, I would say, as it evolved. And as we go forward, we continue to integrate our systems, rather than delivering e-solutions in silos across multiple departments, how we can integrate them, how we can offer the whole of them into an experience to the citizens, and how we can simplify the government more to the citizens. Because very often citizens complain that we don’t know what the government is doing. But if we can kind of present it in a more humane, simpler way, and ensure that the technology is used for solving key societal problems and becoming an aid to governance, and that’s what objective remains.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** There’s so much in there to unpack, and I think some of the themes that were coming through for me was really right from the beginning, you talking about understanding how people wanted to consume information, so not just continuing down the same path of normal government communications, but really working out, where are people going to get their information and how can we be there? How can we be on YouTube? How can we be on Instagram? How can we be speaking people’s language in a way that they understand?

And I think it sounds like that foundation of really putting the way that the citizens want to consume things at the heart of what you do, stood you in really good stead and built those foundations that were then just so needed during the COVID pandemic.

And I wonder, because often when we’re talking to people leading digital change like yourself, we have the technology element, but also there’s a really big cultural element in the way that civil service organizations work and how they respond to needing new skills and – and different governance structures and different approaches.

How did you find the civil service and the other departments have adapted to these new ways of doing things and the new ways of working, whether that be comms or adopting a more agile approach to a vaccination platform?

**ABHISHEK SINGH:** Typically speaking, the civil service very often comes out as something which is conservative, which is difficult to change, and which used to its own traditional ways of functioning, because obviously there’s sometimes lots of rules and procedures that you have to follow, whether you are doing a procurement or whether you are doing implementation of a project. So that makes very often civil service kind of resistant to change and delays becomes the norm.

So what we have done is that the way the (MyGov) or the National (eGov) Division or Digital India Corporation is structured is slightly different from the way that typically the civil service is structured. We incorporated as a Section 8 company, which is the not-for-profit company. And then a lot of delegation of powers has been made there, and there is a lot of flexibility with regard to the kind of resources one can hire, which allows me to hire the best of the resources from the private sector, work closely with industry, collaborate with academic institutions and bring together the best of the minds for solving a public service problem. So that makes it very, very, very agile.

For example, I would give another example like the contact tracing, because again, when COVID struck and then we found that during the period that one is asymptomatic, one can still be passing on the virus, it became a very important to track the contacts of somebody who has tested positive. With the Bluetooth contact tracing, some solutions were developed in Singapore and elsewhere.

So we brought together the best of the engineering minds where there was lockdown and there were a lot of people from industry and all who were available. So we got them as volunteers to work with us along with our teams. And within 15 days, the Aarogya Setu app was developed, which has 200 million-plus users, and it really helped us in addressing the challenges that we had.

Then again, when we were thinking of communicating better, idea came was that why don’t we kind of build up a conversational AI tool. Then at that point of time, we worked with Microsoft and we worked with Accenture, and we worked with some of the AI companies within India to build up a chat bot on our portal.

And again, that was done in collaboration with industry, that was done in record time, without going through the typical procurement processes, because of course the industry also came up and contributed, that they said, we will do it pro bono. And we could onboard them on our teams and then the trust was there. Like, how do you trust other stakeholders? How do you ensure kind of accept that you might not be having the reports you have always done?. There is a lot of people outside the government who can also contribute.

So when we brought together a diverse team of people from government, industry, and academia, we were able to come up with innovative solutions and roll out things very quickly.

Then we remain predominantly MyGov, the communication platform, the organization is around several hundred odd people. But most of them, 90-plus of them are from the private sector, working closely with us, young people who represent all of India, and there are like 22-year-olds there. And they come and tell me that this is the new trend on Instagram, this is what the youngsters are liking.

So when you listen to people, when you bring together diverse stakeholders, when you engage with the industry and other stakeholders, that makes you agile. So that has been the USP of the projects that we have been handling and it has held us in good stead and we feel that that’s the way to go forward, build agile teams, build diverse teams, have younger people in your team, listen to their advice, and then go ahead at what you have to do.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** So lots of lessons to pull out there. So it sounds like the structure of creating a different type of organization that can be empowered to hire the best talent, train the best talent, get the right people in and then listen to those people and give you the flexibility to build different types of partnerships has been really crucial to you being able to operate differently.

And certainly in a lot of countries we’ve talked to, and it sounds like the same in India, the pandemic really has accelerated a lot of appetite within government to accept some of the changes that are going to happen and see digital as actually how government operates, not a “nice to have” on the side.

**ABHISHEK SINGH:** It has transformed. In fact, I’ve been working in the space for a long time, but the pace at which digital transformation has happened in the last two years has been unbelievable.

There is a huge appetite, everybody wants to go digital, especially with the pandemic. Education went online, health went online, e-commerce went up, and there was a demand even for the government to work remotely. People had to pick up all their tools. Video conferencing became normal. Suddenly, we realized that one was able to do ten meetings a day. If we had had to travel physically, it would have been virtually impossible.

But over here I was going from Chennai in south of India to Kashmir in north of India during the course of a day. So it really has brought in a lot of change and transformation, but yes, a lot of challenges also, like there’s so much shortage of tech manpower these days, and it is difficult to have the right people, for the right part for the projects.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** I was really interested in what you were saying about how it’s being set up as a separate organization, so you have that flexibility in hiring,

**ABHISHEK SINGH:** Yeah, and one more thing that we noticed was that for the hiring, we also came up with the concept. Of course because of the pandemic, you work from anywhere. And we realized that when we gave the option of people to work remotely, they could work from (tile, two tile, three cities?), (four ?) cities, the rural areas, villages, stay at their homes and their family homes. And if they have to commute two hours morning, evening, so that productivity always goes down. So we found that the remote working brought in efficiency because it required more efforts in managing their teams in order to ensure that everybody is there on the breakout rooms and ensure their work starts on time and finishes on time. But overall output went up and the employee satisfaction was also very high.

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Yeah, that’s great. So you don’t think it will go back, you don’t think everyone will be back in the office?

**ABHISHEK SINGH:** It will be hybrid. It will be mixed, right?

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Yeah.

**ABHISHEK SINGH:** There are some things like sometimes if we have to make a short video about something, you need the five, six people to brainstorm, will huddle together and come up with ideas and do that.

But a lot of IT work, a lot of tech work, a lot of coding work happens remotely. For that you don’t need to. Like people are working modules and they work on GitHub and other collaboration tools. So that works. So that part will not come, but yes, some part will have to come to the office. It will work in a mixed way.

**[Music]**

**OLIVIA NEAL:** Thank you to Abishek Singh for the insights which he’s shared today. Join us next time to learn more about how he is using data standards as a foundational layer to work across government departments and states, and the DigiLocker project which is providing joined up digital services –and learn who he gets his inspiration from.

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