

PREMIUM

Careers

Editors' Picks

Portfolios

vents

Resource library

Site Search

Q



By Julian Bajkowski Wednesday March 29, 2023







Upcoming Events





Commercial Acumen for the Public

PREMIUM INSIGHTS AND ANALYSIS

Former GCHQ cyber ops chief launches offensive on tech recruitment bias



Sally Walker speaks the truth. (Magnetic Shots)

As one might expect from the former and founding head of offensive cyber operations at Britain's Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ), Sally Walker's LinkedIn profile is a paradigm of understatement.

"UK Civil Service. Full-time. 24 years 2 mos".

Softly spoken and with an acerbically dry wit, Walker is wearing her insecurities and anxieties literally on stage, as she introduces herself as a nervous public speaker now terrified by the fact she's been sandwiched to talk between former Australian prime minister John Winston Howard and guitar-strumming astronaut Chris Hadfield. No pressure.

"We've been a little careless with our prime ministers in the UK recently," Walker starts off as an icebreaker. "We ran a competition between our last former prime minister and a lettuce, and, ah ..."

For a retired cyber warrior who clearly has experience doing stuff with computers and systems that would ordinarily have you locked up were it not permitted by a very specific act of parliament, Walker is adamant from the start about what she won't reveal.

"I have to give you a keynote without telling you what I did. And describing a virtual world that we all struggle to picture."

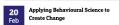
The failure of monoculture

Ironically, the message that Walker brings to the Australian Information Security Association's Cyber Conference is probably far more controversial than, say, <u>rumbling the head of the Wagner Group's 1990s vintage pre-Blackberry smartphone</u>.

She's out to demolish people's inherent prejudices and assumptions, particularly the way the many achievements of outsiders are airbrushed over by the dominant cultural and governmental machine, and her first stop is Bletchley Park, home of the British military's code-crackers, many of whom are women who went unrecognised for decades.

Walker observes that by the time the Second World War came around, it became viscerally clear to Churchill and his commanders that there was no way they would ever get near the required brainpower to run a wartime cipher and code operation from universities or traditional talent channels. It was, literally, a skills crisis — not that history repeats.





View Calendar >

Partner Content

We design, build, manage and modernize the mission-critical technology systems that the world depends on every day.





eBook: A quick guide to effective data visualisation and infographics



eBook: Government Digital Performance and Inclusion Indicator



"In 1937... it became apparent raiding the nation's maths departments would be insufficient to meet Bletchley's needs. The art of codebreaking was not a public skill," Walker noted.

"Instead, the search was for linguists mathematicians: crossword experts. Women, heaven forbid, were called on — but only from good families."

Out from under the rock

The selection criteria started with academic ability, then high-trust family connections "and finally on the basis of potential" Walker says.

Appraised of the recruits, Churchill, not renowned for his delicacy, reportedly remarked to Bletchley chief Alastair Denniston that "I told you to leave no stone unturned to get staff, but I had no idea you would take me so literally."

These days Walker is advising a tech head-hunter-cum-social enterprise, dubbed <u>WithYouWithMe</u>, that takes on the more difficult challenges to match the talent that would otherwise be discriminated against or shunned because of systemic and social biases.

It's like a laundry list of who usually never makes it to an interview: neurodivergent individuals, refugees, veterans, women in tech, First Nations people and first responders.

Standing on the outside

Walker steers clear of directly plugging WithYouWithMe, but makes it crystal clear that many of the new ways of thinking, especially problem-solving and team-building, which were used to establish Britain's National Cyber Force are being utilised to help build a sustainable cyber industry.

"First and foremost, it was achieved by building a brilliant team of people," Walker says. At least half were women, from the outset. "As we build a safer, ever more connected digital society, we need to put skilled people and trusted tech at its heart," Walker says.

"We need to allow everyone, who wants to, to contribute to their maximum potential. We need to balance our curiosity about the future and their expertise in the past. We need to make the case for change in the technology ecosystem to make it harder to attack, easier to defend, inherently sustainable. We need to retrospectively address the doors left open over years gone by. Then we can make the techenabled world a better place."

A big part of the problem, as Walker sees it (and is borne out in data if you look for it) is that many established human resources and management models tend to derive from strict hierarchical structures rather than self-enabled groups that look to the skills of their members.

Part of the challenge is overcoming primal fight-or-flight responses that respond to urgency rather than a considered response based on the best available information. There is no place for fear, and that makes for a very different kind of authority and management approach.

Beyond adrenalin

Again, while Walker isn't spelling it out, the intelligence community discipline is evident. What is the outcome? What is the context? What are the motivations and the bigger picture?

"We have to move past fight-or-flight. Wicked problems in the modern world don't need 'act first think later': they demand us to think better, act faster," Walker says, cautioning that training methodologies are not enough on their own, especially in the cyber arena.

"There are a range of ways to facilitate more strategic problem solving, starting with the team. The widest possible range of lived experience to inform any new situation; the maximum divergence of individual brains trained to think differently and bring unusual perspectives; a willingness to challenge constantly; to communicate, to share understanding — not to instruct; and robust ethical frameworks for near real-time operational decision making.

Question everything

Taking questions after her speech, Walker observes that it's not only cyber and certain kinds of established organisations that limit the entry of outsiders. She doesn't offer, and doesn't need to say that the public service or civil service is an obvious example.

Walker, herself a psychologist by training, references the formative primary school playground psychology around group games, when deciding who they want to be on their team — "you know, when you're waiting to be picked."

Kids figure out when they are not in the running, Walker reckons. "Sometimes you just walk away. If you're asked to be on the team, you're like, 'well I'll give this a go'."

The excluded, uncool kids who walk away, maybe stay away or find another game, some puzzles or hang out in the library with a book to pass the lunch hour in relative safety. The kids with lunch boxes the other kids sneer at, or have trouble socialising.

This is the talent pool where Walker is hunting for cyber potential.

You can take the spy out of the Doughnut...

READ MORE:

Fechner fights his corner: "Technologies available to us today have infinite abilities for good"

About the autho



By Julian Bajkowsl

Julian Bajkowski is a research and technical-driven reporter with over 20 years' experience in technology and cybersecurity journalism. Julian has also been an adviser in public policy and corporate affairs for Mastercard and eftpos.

 Tags:
 ADD
 Alan Turing
 ASD
 Autism
 Autism spectrum
 COMINT
 flight or flight
 First Nations

 first responders
 FSB
 GCHQ
 GRU
 HUMINT
 Lovelace
 neurodivergent individuals
 neurodiversity

 overnment Communications Headquarters
 Premium
 Putin
 recruitment bias
 refugees
 Sally Walker
 SIGINT

 TEMPEST
 The Doughnut
 tradecraft
 veterans
 Wagner group
 WithYouWithMe
 women
 workplace diversity

PREMIUM INSIGHTS AND ANALYSIS

More Premium Content

Public service stalwart laments political leadership in face of Australia's COVID-19 crisis

The successful ACT senior secondary colleges have reached an evolutionary crossroads that may lead to their demise. Can they be revitalised – or will they face a 'gale of creative destruction'?

Innovation: a little less conversation, a little more action How to make innovation something we do, not just something we talk about Creating behavioural changes in the way Victorians use their transport system

Facing COVID-19: Are the UK and US still 'world-class' governments?

Understanding what 'unprecedented' really means for foreign policy in Australia



Subscribe for less \$4 a week



Better briefings written just for the public sector

Get Premium Today >



sector, with daily news, commentary, analysis and expert advice.

Owners of the many nations across

Australia, and pay our respect to Elders pay
and present. We recognise that their
sovereignty has never been ceded.

News
Research Series

People & Capability
Thought Leadership
Editors' Picks
Resource Library

Site Map

Mandarin Careers Mandarin Live The Juice Newsletter

Mandarin Premium

Legal Connect
Privacy Policy About Us
Terms of Usage Contact Us
Code of Conduct Support
Our Team

Portfolios

Jurisdictions

New Zealand

Features

Partner & Advertising solutions
Public Sector Events Calendar

Partner Content

Crikey SmartCompany

