**Marie Hamilton**

Every job is digital, so you need to have the right digital skills. People talk about the way that we train our young people at the moment for jobs that don't exist yet. I think that we're starting to have a problem even bigger than that, that we're actually training our young people for jobs that are not going to exist in the future.

**Ajay Bains**

Welcome to the Demystifying Cyber Podcast by Lancashire Cyber Foundry. I'm your host, Ajay Bains. I currently work as a business Support Officer for the Lancashire Cyber Foundry. We're passionate about helping businesses realise their digital potential. We work with eligible organisations across Lancashire to support them with placing cyber innovation at the heart of their strategy. Today we welcome a special guest, Marie Hamilton. Marie is the Greater Manchester region lead for Microsoft. Welcome Marie.

**MH**

Hi, Ajay.

**AB**

and thanks again for agreeing to be part of our podcast series. Given your current role where you support with regional transformation in the Greater Manchester Area I think you can provide some really valuable insights into the role that technology plays in shaping organisational transformation. The need for digital upskilling and local communities, whilst also shedding light on the many careers that exist within tech. First off, I always like to delve into the lives of my guests, so could you tell us Maria a little bit more about your kind of career background to date and what led you to your current role at Microsoft.

**MH**

So, I've been working in the technology sector for about 25 years now, so I initially started working in the education sector, working with schools. In fact I was actually involved in putting some of the very first computers into schools, which was really exciting, had quite a lot of involvement in the Building Schools for the Future Programme, which was very technology focused as well at the time and then to be honest with you, I spent the last 10 years working in central government, which was really exciting. Working with organisations such as Downing Street, Cabinet Office, Bank of England but to be honest with you. From my perspective, I think technology has got a real transformation, real ability to transform things. And I think at the moment it's really exciting time to be in technology and I think the biggest opportunities exist from an organisation like Microsoft. So, I think the technology coming out of Microsoft is really, really exciting and the impact that it can have in the public sector was why I wanted to join Microsoft. The other benefit is as well is that I am now not having to travel backwards and forwards for between Manchester and London, I spend most of my time in Greater Manchester which is which is lovely as I've got two kids.

**AB**

Ohh wow, that's so nice to see that you've kind of settled in the role and great to see that you've got such an abundant kind of amount of experience across several different sectors there. That's fantastic. Are you able to share some of your kind of experiences working on particular projects at Microsoft that you know you're proud of, that have made a real kind of positive impact.

**MH**

Yeah, as I said, you know, working for Microsoft is really exciting place to be because I do think the technologies that we bring have that real ability to transform. So, myself these days, I don't have a tendency to get that heavily involved in projects on the ground. So, I take a more sort of strategic approach. But one of the things that Microsoft are involved in at the moment across Greater Manchester is a project with GMCA where we're looking at bringing data together from very different parts of the region to deliver better outcomes for citizens. And one of the key benefits that we've been able to deliver on that is an early years app. So, I don't know whether you're, whether you're aware. But about 70% of children are deemed school ready by the age of five, and the way that local authorities track children's development has always been very, very paper based. What we've been able to do through the GM digital platform, working with our partner ANS and Greater Manchester Combined Authority is to digitise that process. Which enables the authorities to intervene at a much earlier point and therefore, you know, deliver much better outcomes for the children and the families involved. So, I'm really excited and really good use of technology.

**AB**

Wow, that sounds really interesting. And there's a kind of that, that social mobility element in there which we'll touch on touch upon kind of little later in the podcast. But one of the things that I wanted to ask because I know that you've worked across kind of the public sector and also the business community, a lot of SME's in in kind of the Greater Manchester area. So, I wanted to ask if there are any kind of observations that that you've made or key themes that you've identified from working in your role that could be, you know, things that are done particularly well or perhaps areas where there's deficiencies that you have that you've observed that could be improved?

**MH**

So, I think I think it's really exciting times to be honest with you from a technology point of view and it's a really exciting time to be in Greater Manchester as well. So, at the moment you know Greater Manchester is the is the fastest growing tech hub and that brings lots of benefits and some challenges are too, I guess. One of the biggest things that I've seen from a technology point of view is that move in to the cloud so away from data centres into cloud based technology which has got lots of benefits including environmental benefits, which is also a sort of a, you know a key outcome that we're trying to drive in Greater Manchester at the moment. I think as well coming to the work that you do as part of the cyber foundry and cyber corridor, there is a lot more focus now on cyber. So, looking at how we can protect businesses and how we can work together and I guess just educate the business community that that they need to have the right security in place and the impacts of a cyber-attack and what that means.

**AB**

Yeah and no absolutely and that kind of leads on to the area of digital upskilling, which I know that that you're big on and that's something as you mentioned here at the at the cyber foundry. Is something that that we're really big on. That's part of our kind of our package really of support for Lancashire based SME's, but in terms of kind of digital upskilling and a lot of the efforts you know, across regions to support businesses with digital upskilling, how significant do you think that is in terms of levelling up and driving healthy and healthier economies?

**MH**

I think it's absolutely. I think it's huge. I think it's probably one of the most critical things. So, if I look at the strategy that we have within Greater Manchester, it kind of goes in three different pillars and this is the way I always I always talk about this. We look at how we can support economic recovery and economic growth within the Greater Manchester region, how we can support digital transformation of public services and then how we can help drive sustainability for across region as well. And if you look at that skilling is front and centre. So, in order to deliver that economic growth, particularly where digital is key, we need to have people with the right digital skills available and that goes into the digital transformation as well. So, at every level, we need to encourage more people into the digital sector, but make sure that the people that we've got there have got the right skills so that we can keep advancing both from an economic point of view and also from a public service perspective.

**AB**

Thank you for that, Marie. That's really, really informative. One of the things that was really keen to explore with yourself today was the area of social mobility and this was something that that I could resonate with when I saw that you had a kind of active interest in this, you were very much an advocate for social and upwards mobility. But when we look at social mobility and its processes, they can be seen as integral to the very metabolism of societies in terms of kind of growing and maintaining societies and driving change, change for good really. As such, the topic of social mobility, it kind of stands at the Nexus of British political agenda. We see this, this ambitious rhetoric from Prime ministers from the past and currently about this area and what's being done by government to kind of achieve social mobility. But despite this, you know, it still remains fairly plagued in terms of kind of the layers of complexity associated with things like class privilege, accentism and disadvantage continue to loom. And the BBC kind of more recently highlighted kind of some of these aspects in their documentary how to crack the glass ceiling and that kind of uncovered some of these implicit and explicit barriers that a lot of graduates are experiencing currently. You know things like where, where they come from, their post code, you know what their parents did, their accent and these cultural themes, they perpetuate a set of distinct economic, social and cultural barriers. But I wanted to kind of, for the purposes of today, focus on the tech sector in particular, and so I wanted to kind of firstly ask what is the key driver behind your passion for social mobility and where did that come from?

**MH**

Yeah so, I guess my passion and it's and it's the same passion for Skilling really came from my personal background. So, I come from a fairly modest background. So, my dad was a bus driver and interestingly he couldn't read. So, when my mom, my dad, my dad, my dad skipped school. When he was little, didn't understand the benefit and for the majority of his life, he couldn't actually read. He taught himself to read in his 40s. And so, what he did is he sort of pushed down to me and my sister that education was key, which I guess as, you know, transformed my life. Because by going to school, going to college, and then eventually going on to university, you know, I've managed to make a life for myself and obviously a career it's made a massive impact for me. I think you know, we talk about social mobility and awful lot and we talk about life outcomes and the figures are really stark, in Greater Manchester alone I think we've got about 1.2 million people who are digitally excluded, you know, just don't have access. We've currently got a cost-of-living crisis and I think it's incumbent on us all to try and help people. You talked about the documentary there the BBC did recently the class ceiling. I watched that as well and I and I thought it was really interesting. Some of the observations, but obviously they were starting to look at people who were already graduated and were trying to find roles. And that is, you know, that is a big problem in that people from a lower social economic background don't always have the right connections. I think that's probably one of the biggest areas that we need to focus on. But I think it's bigger than that and I think we need to look before that, you know, looking at the class ceiling, the class ceiling is set much lower than the gender-based glass ceiling in the we need to reach our young people because they don't even realise that there's opportunity that are out there for them. So, we need to educate at an early age, tell them what the opportunities are, create belief in them that some of the careers that they see from a distance are possible for them.

**AB**

Yeah. No, that really resonates with me. And I guess that one of the things that you're currently doing as well is kind of supporting with the Cyber Girls 1st and you're a real big advocate for that and that's a fantastic initiative, isn't it? And what's been a key highlight for you in terms of kind of the whole cyber girl's first events that take place across the country, has there been a kind of a key moment for you in in supporting of that.

**MH**

Yeah, I mean, to be honest with you, I'd say that every cyber for girls first event is a key moment. So, it's one of those things that kind of, you know, really uplifts me and really excites me so and you'll be aware of this working in the cyber sector. But currently, I think you know the cyber sector, there's only 12% women within the cyber sector and when we talk to girls, we find that they have a tendency to be turned off by the word cyber, the word tech. They have this image almost of you know of boys in bedrooms, playing on Xboxes and that type of thing. So, I guess for me it is demystifying the world of cyber and showing them that there are opportunities out there getting them excited about it. But then beyond that, we also then need to show them what the pathways are, so we need to show them what's possible, what's available, what's out there. That is for them and then helps and direct them to get to where they may want to be.

**AB**

Yeah, no, absolutely. And it's, you know, refreshing to see kind of you being a an advocate and a key player and trying to drive that change. That's fantastic, Marie. And in terms of and just kind of focusing in here on the on the career agenda, but what advice would you kind of give to those that are looking to explore tech as a future career path? And how do you think that they should approach the process of starting to think about this early on?

**MH**

Yeah, I think I think one of the, I mean, and this goes back to cyber girls first again, I mean I think one of the messages that we need to get out to our young people and our career changes as well is that digital is everywhere. Every job is digital. So, you need to have the right digital skills. And that's going to become more and more so as we move forward, people talk about the way that we train our young people at the moment for jobs that don't exist yet. I think that we're starting to have a problem even bigger than that, that we're actually training our young people for jobs that are not going to exist in the future as they become more digitised. So, I think you know, I would say to anybody at any age you need to become more digitally aware and as for careers into technology, there are so many different, there are so many different routes and at so many different age ranges as well. So, one of the routes I really like is apprenticeships. You know I think that's a really good opportunity for young people to find a way through technology without necessarily having to go into university. So that brings it back to the social mobility piece. But university you know, University was a great experience for me, and it and it is and it is right for some people. One of the big things that we've been talking about from a Microsoft point of view and some of the universities that I work with, is a degree in digital. So, you know, we've been having a big conversation in Greater Manchester that there are graduates that are currently out of work. Did you know if you've got a digital certificate along with your degree, you're actually about 2.4 times more likely to land your first role. So, one of the messages we've been delivering into the universities is a degree isn't enough. You know, you need your students to do the digital certifications as well to go along with that as it will help them find a role. So those are the those are the two things that I would point people to. Apprenticeships or looking at, you know, digital certifications to go along with your degree. The other thing that is worth looking at is Microsoft learn. So, I can send you the details later. But Microsoft learn as a whole raft of resources on there for people who are looking at digital careers as well as learning pathways that they can take to fulfil those digital careers. We've also had a look at the at the top six career options for people looking at a digital careers and again on Microsoft learn there are pathways that people can follow to. To skill themselves up to make them, you know, to give them the ability to apply for those roles.

**AB**

Yeah, we can definitely put a few links to those resources out there. I'm sure that will be very, very useful for a lot of students and for those tuning in and before we wrap up this episode, it's been great to have you on here, Marie. And of course, I know that you are kind of alumnus of Lancaster University, so I couldn't kind of finish this session of asking what your kind of favourite memory or time was when studying here at Lancaster.

**MH**

So I had a I had a fabulous time at university to be honest, with some really, really good memories, particularly when we had some quite thick snow while I was there, which was very interesting from a Lancaster point of view because it's quite difficult to get around when that happens. But I think my fondest memory and this goes back to social mobility again, is when I was when I graduated. So, on my graduation day I was really lucky I actually got invited to lunch by the chancellor with Princess Alexandra, who's the patron of Lancaster University. So, I was one of three students that was selected to do that, but the best thing from my perspective was that, in fact, they invited my mum and dad along as well. So again, you know, if you think about my mum and Dad's background, they came from a working-class background, council estate. So, for them to be at lunch with Princess Alexandra, with me graduating, it was just an amazing moment and my mum said it was one of the proudest moments of her life. So…

**AB**

You can't help but smile when you hear a story like that. That's amazing, and they must have been very proud.

**MH**

Yeah. No, it was, it was, it was fantastic. Loved it.

**AB**

Thank you for sharing that, Marie. That's great. Thank you so much, again. It's been a real pleasure to have you on here. You know you're doing some fantastic work and you know, I look forward to kind of seeing some more of that moving forward. So, thanks again, Marie.

**MH**

No, thank you for having me. It's been. It's been great.

**AB**

Thank you for listening to the Demystifying Cyber podcast. We hope you've enjoyed today's episode. Feel free to get in touch to find out more about the Lancashire Cyber Foundry. Join us next time to further unpack and demystify the cyber landscape.