MAKING SFIA STICK: HOW TO EMBED SKILLS FRAMEWORKS INTO EVERYDAY PRACTICE

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TRANSCRIPT

Mary-Anne Merriott

Thanks again for joining us. We're really looking forward to having a good conversation this afternoon. And let me introduce today's hosts. So, we have Paul Collins, the CEO of Skills TX, the leading SFIA software tool. Paul has observed multiple SFIA roll outs in quite a wide range of organisations all over the world. Thanks very much for joining today, Paul.

We also have Duncan Bar joining us. Duncan is a CIO and consultant, he has previously worked with Napier City Council, Farmlands Coop and BP. Duncan has some really great personal experience in his capacity as CIO, of implementing SFIA and working with it within his teams. So, thanks for joining us, Duncan.

And myself? I'm Mary-Anne Merriott. As you can see from my name tag, I'm the Head of Client Success at the Digital Skills Agency. We are a consultancy specialising in implementing SFIA and in helping organisations keep it alive. I work with a variety of organisations to help them make the most of SFIA over the long term.

Our topic today is all about making SFIA stick. We've noticed that often organisations can start up with a lot of enthusiasm about SFIA initiatives. But sometimes keeping up the momentum with it and really getting it embedded into your culture can be challenging. So, what we want to explore today is why SFIA initiatives can lose steam and more importantly, how do you make it a living part of your organisation and grow it into your culture as time goes on?

We'll have some time for some good Q&A at the end. So, if you have questions as we go along, I invite you to enter those into the Q&A section of the webinar. You should

have a button at the top of your screen to go into Q&A, and we'll come to those and talk through those later on in the session. So, let's get started.

The first point we want to talk about today is what happens to make SFIA initiatives lose momentum. So, let's start with talking about what are some of the main reasons that this can happen. Paul, I want to invite you to jump in and share any of your experiences first to start off with.

Paul Collins

When I think about it, it's actually quite a long list, but better that we filter out some of the ones that we see more commonly and there's a couple that do jump out at me and it's one of the benefits and almost one of the downsides, dare I say, the actual SFIA framework itself is very agnostic and that makes it good because no one's sneaked any references to proprietary technology.

Mary-Anne Merriott

Can you explain what you mean by agnostic? Just in case people aren't familiar with how that applies to SFIA?

Paul Collins

Yeah. So, if we look at this from a technology point of view, I'll use an example. SFIA really beautifully describes programming and coding as a skill, but no reference to the languages. So agnostic is where we describe the skill, but we don't describe the technology that we do it with. Application support is another great one. Yes, I can support applications, but it's really good to be able to demonstrate what applications do I support. So certainly in those early days we use SFIA sort of out the box, and if we don't start loading up the technology so that we can describe the organisation not just in terms of the skills but what they use, then that can sort of certainly for people that are technical, it can sort of feel like. So what? And I'll leave it at that because I could go on a bit longer, but I'm sure Duncan's got some thoughts as well.

Duncan Barr

Just as a background for everyone, we at Napier City Council implemented SFIA about three years ago, and I think one of the challenges from the beginning was it was like a new language and it was foreign to the IT people as well as the rest of the organisation. And being a language that isn't a spoken language that you need to bring it up in conversation a lot. So, it was like it's easy to forget that we're talking SFIA and all the benefits and the challenges of it. So, I think trying to bring it into you into your weekly or by fortnightly conversations all the time is important. And if you don't, you can go a month or so and go, oh, we haven't talked about it. So, I think bringing up conversation a lot is important.

Mary-Anne Merriott

Yeah, that's definitely been my observation as well. I guess I tend to see the steam getting lost when there isn't that continuous discussion about it, not just with the team, but at leadership level. What I observe happen sometimes is that senior leaders will implement SFIA and they'll be really enthusiastic about the benefits that it can bring and making it happen for their team. But then, you know, you move on to the next project and life happens and so forth. So unless your senior leaders are emphasising that, hey, this is part of what we do now, this is how we want our leaders to be growing the team, these are some resources that we want to encourage people to be using, they kind of tend to lose focus on it and therefore their managers underneath them don't give it the same degree of priority to have those SFIA conversations, development conversations, skills and upskilling, conversations with their teams. And that's when it can start to lose its edge. And I think very much what Duncan said, keeping that currency with everybody is really important to keep it on track.

Paul Collins

I think actually, Mary-Anne, I'm just following up on that and totally agreeing with all those comments, and you use the word there that I think is quite critical and that that word is project. So, if we do a roll out and it's seen as a project, projects have a start and an end. With these things that the conversation has got to continue and it should just be what you do, and I think Duncan, yeah, some of the most successful clients that we work with, it is it's you know that having a chat over a coffee on a Friday afternoon and they're talking about skills and they're talking in the language of SFIA and yeah, that keeps that currency as well. So, I think not seeing it as a project, but it's actually something you're going to do ongoing is a good way to view it.

Mary-Anne Merriott

Yeah, I think so as well to set that up for success. Another thing that we observe from time to time, we're often called in to help when an organisation tried to implement SFIA, but they haven't quite set it up right. Maybe there hasn't been a proper of understanding of what it is and how to use it. Maybe they haven't had any training to really understand how to get it going in the best possible way. So, when SFIA is not set up right, people can think of it as being quite complex. This this new language that no one really understands and when people start thinking it's a bit too complex and a bit too hard to use, it can start getting left by the wayside. And the truth is that SFIA is not hard to use, but it does require a little bit of learning like with any new with any new skill. In fact it just requires a little bit of time to bone up on the basics of it, to be able to use it effectively and where we see organisations do that they are really well set up for success and they often do go on to be very successful with SFIA.

I can think of one organisation in particular that comes to mind. I got caught in to help out with where they tried to get started with SFIA but they didn't really get any kind of training or guidance and implementing it before they went ahead and worked with it and there was a lot of enthusiasm for it at the beginning but because they didn't quite have the background to be able to set it up to support what they've really wanted to do, it got seen as a bit a bit a bit too much, and they moved on from it. And then in future times there was there was quite a bit of resistance from the team to come back to using it again because they hadn't had a good experience the first time around. So,

I think it's really important to make sure that it's set up well so that you have that good experience so that the conversations are going to continue.

Paul Collins

Definitely.

Mary-Anne Merriott

And what do you what do you think in terms of what leaders should be watching out for to make sure that they catch these situations before they start to happen? What's been something you've noticed Paul?

Paul Collins

Currency is the word I'm going to use, and you know we encourage leadership to monitor this from the point of view of our people engaged with their creative element. You know what one of the common things we see is for leaders to say with a big sigh of relief: right, we've got a skill inventory and we use SFIA and they might have had some good SFIA education, but then there's not that recognition that skills are changing all the time and it's not just about increasing them. If we haven't used the skill for a while, you know it sort of drops off our skill profile. And if that isn't being constantly maintained and it'll be different cadences for different organisations in terms of what that is, but you know, if you're not seeing that activity, someone's skill profile hasn't changed for six months, that is definitely a sign that we've started to switch off and reverted maybe to our old ways of working. Now, that's a real key one for me.

Mary-Anne Merriott

What do you think, Duncan?

Duncan Barr

I think the way we implemented it, we certainly had some very engaged people, but we've seen some people that couldn't quite see what was in it for them. We linked it to upskilling and to a training framework and then allocated people 4 hours a month to, say, go and do some online training, quite a few of the people said, hey, there's nothing in for me. I don't want to learn this, and it was actually that they were disinterested. But that was probably more about the people themselves, those that were keen loved it. But trying to sell it to everyone was always a hard thing because we didn't mandate it. We'd said, hey, we're doing the framework, your job descriptions are being updated with the framework, but we're going to give you 4 hours a month to do some training and they go, I don't think I'll learn anything, I don't want to be part of it, I'm not going to upskill and that was just like, well, we can take a horse to water, but we can't make a drink. So, the disinterest was probably more about the people involved. We had some people using SFIA all the time.

Mary-Anne Merriott

Do you think then it would be a bit of a flag if there were more than, say just one or two who were individually of that kind of persuasion?

Duncan Barr

Yep, the department was 40 staff, and there's probably about 10 that disengaged. But if you did your team profile, you'd probably find they're the ones that need the most help, not the least help. So, there's just man management, I think.

Paul Collins

You must spot that as well, Mary-Anne, in terms of when you're working with some of the clients, the signs that pop out that say I think I think these people are switching off.

Mary-Anne Merriott

Yeah, and Duncan's quite right. You know, there are always people in the team who are going to be really enthusiastic about using something like SFIA, and there are always some people who are going to either maybe not think that that's something they want to devote their time to if they're particularly busy and they have a lot of demands on them, or they might for just individual reasons, think that it's not something that they that they want to work with, and everyone's different. You get people of all kinds of persuasions. But I think there's a difference between people who are deprioritising it and people who are kind of actively hostile towards using something that's development related. And I think you definitely want to watch out for individuals who might, I suppose, poison the well and bring other people down and stop engagement elsewhere in the team.

And if there are those that are deprioritising it, you probably want to find out why that isn't and help them to give the right level of focus to it because you know, I guess from a leadership perspective, if you've invested in SFIA because you want to help with developing your team so that everyone can perform better, your organisation needs to do things, you know you've got skills over here, but you need to have skills over here. You want people to be growing; you want to be encouraging that. So you want them to come on the journey with you, and if they're not prioritising it or they're disinterested, I guess it's time to maybe change tack with comms and help them see both how it can help them and maybe help them understand that it's an expectation that we need people to be using it, that this isn't just a nice to have benefit that we're offering, actually we want people to be developing, we want you to be using your skills and growing your skills.

So, let's keep the conversation going and talk about how we might look at building SFIA into everyday culture, because this is the kind of the holy grail of using SFIA. You go to all the trouble of implementing it and you want it to be used, and you want it to be living and breathing and become a resource that's really well taken up by your team.

So, what do we all think it looks like when SFIA is actually part of the culture? And for those of you listening, I'd love you to drop this in the chat too. What do you see happening when SFIA is really becoming part of part of the culture? Duncan, what's your take on this?

Duncan Barr

I think that the one of the reasons we put SFIA in is we we'd had quite a high staff turnover and by bringing it in and realigning job descriptions, we had them all rewritten. I think it gave a relevancy to people's roles. It allowed us to benchmark better against this strategic pay framework, that HR used. So, we became a bit of a leader in staff development in the organisation. So, it was quite uplifting, and a lot of people saw that true benefit.

Mary-Anne Merriott

So, you were integrating SFIA into various other practices and once that happened you saw you saw an even greater uplift because it almost became systemic bringing those things together?

Duncan Barr

Yes, it would bring it together and you know we reflected a year later we realised we had had no staff turnover for three years afterwards. So, I would say the programme worked so people were more satisfied in what they were doing. So, this is just one of the one of the tools that we used.

Mary-Anne Merriott

Wow, that's quite a great result actually.

Paul Collins

First-hand experience is always good. I mean, that's a great statistic as well. Jeez, there's a couple of things that that jump out and it takes me back really to the early days. We had a hashtag that we used to use quite a bit, and it sort of covers the cultural aspects. It was making a very strong point of the fact that skill development is not something that's done to you. It's something you're actively involved with, and SFIA gives the language that, as Duncan was mentioning before, to express yourself and where you want to go, and you know this is my development path.

You know, we encourage organisations that when they're looking at development, it's not just about the job that they're doing currently, but what is the job you want to do in future and let's start moving towards that and that becomes like a pull from the employee side like what can I do next? What can I do next? How do I develop this skill and when the conversation switches from go and do this to what can I do next? I think that's when we know that that culture shift has happened.

And I think you were spot on there, Duncan, before that, it isn't for everybody. You know some people are pretty happy. They like what they do. You know, they get their paycheck, they go surfing at the weekend. That's great. They're doing a great job. But then there are others that can use this to truly drive their career pivots, their career if we want to use some current terminology and when we see that in terms of usually expressed through the development action plan and the fact that they are tracking against the future position, then you know it feels like SFIA's doing what it was meant to do, you know, all around that, that development piece.

Mary-Anne Merriott

Yeah. Now I agree with you, and I had a little happy moment recently where I saw evidence of exactly this happening. So someone who's working in one of our current client organisations, they recently went through a transformation and she's part of their team there and she came to me directly and said, hey, you know, we've just been through all this, all our job descriptions have changed. We've now got new SFIA skills for our job descriptions. And my team really are keen to get stuck into the new phase of development and they are asking me what the new SFIA job description was like, and can we please talk about this together? Can we release this to them? And that just that just made me really excited that the team were getting proactive about their development in that way, and they were seeing this as an opportunity to keep themselves growing and moving forward. That was a really good indicator when they're asking for it like that. As you say that it's digging into the culture.

So how do you think, how do you think managers can achieve that? What would be your tips for helping that actually start to happen and start becoming part of those planning and development conversations. Duncan, what did you find work well for you?

Duncan Barr

It was continuing engagement with our team leaders to check in with yourselves about how we were going. It was getting HR on board, and we got to the stage where when we were recruiting staff we were using, we changed that questionnaire. It has to be around the skills and we scored people differently in that and saying when we asked a question maybe about software development, that was how they answered the question and we could write where the skill was at which right from the outset, we know where that person's at and we could start those conversations that was doing a monthly check in on a on a one-on-one basis with the team leaders about everyone's PD and how that's going. So yeah, once again, it's just trying to raise the level of conversation. It's trying to engage more people.

And it becomes the new habit, and that's the best part we've been talking about. I think it becomes a new habit, a new skill set, new vocabulary that that you could try and be. It's not just the set and forget.

Mary-Anne Merriott

It sounds like to do that you had some pretty cadences of activity that you were encouraging the team to adopt to build that habit.

Paul Collins

Yeah, I think I use this more of like an anecdote, but it really ties in with that word that you just used their Duncan habits that you know, in the world of skills. And if you link performance into that, you know, the world seems to be built around annual or by annual performance conversations. What are we going to do for the next six months, and that quite often, it's part of HR policies and whatever else, industry relations maybe, but to change the conversation to be 15 minutes every week or a couple of weeks over a coffee and you're using SFIA as the language for that conversation. And you've got the data to talk against. So here I am now. And this is where I want to be to be better at what I'm already doing or to take me to the next level. And so also, I've real clarity that development is a journey. And to see that journey and I'll explain that in a second, Mary-Anne, that you know we don't go from: here's a skill we need to develop, great, you developed it. It just doesn't work like that. You know we don't go on a course and it's suddenly we're the expert and to be able to have that dialogue at that level of detail, like OK, I need a training course because I need to develop this skill from scratch and I don't really know anything about it. And then at some point in the future, you can track that you've now got knowledge of that, but you really need a bit of help to get you to the next level to practise it in the workplace.

And then for me, the thing that really sort of cements this in terms of weaving it into development planning is recognising between leadership and the workforce. That the work that you do every day quite often is improving a skill, you know until you've got to that level where you can consider yourself competent and there's no more to learn. Although some people argue there always is. But I usually say that's technology that you're learning and not the skill.

But to be able to have that like I need some help now you know who can help? Can I go and be seconded somewhere? And we document that as part of the development plan. Then you come back and you practise and even that ongoing business as usual is documented as a development action. That can be linked back to a skill becoming better. You know, I take it to its ultimate extreme. That work becomes evidence that you can perform at that level with that skill and those conversations. And you know, we help obviously our clients with how you go about that.

That they're really super positive, energising conversations. You know, where when you put the word performance review, we're going to sit down, and we're going to go through a form and fill it in. That's sort of, yeah. It's not got quite that future looking and positive sort of vibe to it.

Mary-Anne Merriott

Thanks, Paul. Let's jump over to the Q&A. We've had a few questions come in, let's to take a bit of look at those. Let's take a look at the first one that we've got in here, which is can you give some examples of successful change initiatives that have been implemented to transform people from change resistors to adopters when

implementing SFIA. Oh, that's a great question and I think we've probably all got examples we could use from that. Duncan, do you want to jump in with any of your experiences?

Duncan Barr

I think I think in our world it was very much mental mindset because what we linked, as I said before, we linked not only going to SFIA having our JDS done, but we also gave people a subscription to Skillsoft Percipio. And we made it about, we care about you, here's a tool to use, we're giving you time to do it. And we valued that time and licencing at probably about $4000 a year. So, we were investing in people, and I think that focus on people's own self-belief and self-willingness was really uplifting. And I think that turned a lot of people because in the past nothing happened. You might get a conference once every two years if you were lucky and it's usually the same people. So a lot of people that were probably not targeted in the past suddenly got a lot of love and attention, and I think that changed the changed the way because it was about them, wasn't about me, it was about them and it was. It was about their skills and their personal traits that we were developing.

Mary-Anne Merriott

Definitely. When people understand the value to them, you can see that change, something that we've seen from time to time is that people can resist because they perhaps don't have or don't understand complete information about who gets to see their data. So, you know, once I've had my SFIA profile completed, who can see that? Is that going to be used to evaluate me out of the organisation as part of transformation? It's one of the big worries that we see people get: is everyone in the organisation going to see my profile? How private is it going to be? What are you going to do with it? Where is it stored? Is the data secure? So, we find that over-communicating the security for the information and what it is and is not going to be used for and doing that really early can help those people who might be resistant for those reasons. So always over-communicate what you're doing with SFIA so that there's no doubt in people's minds that there is, there should be no hidden agendas with it. It should be a very positive initiative and always be really clear and especially in today's world, what you're doing and how you're using that data.

Duncan Barr

I think that's right, Mary-Anne. It's here. Tell people it's for good. Which it is was always was.

Mary-Anne Merriott

That's what it's designed for, for sure.

All right, let's look at the next question we've got here. When the organisation starts to consider the skills required for roles, not just qualifications, they are showing that SFIA is part of the culture. Yeah, that's a really great observation.

The whole point of what SFIA is about is about sharing skills, things that you can do in the real world, not just qualifications. You know, lots of people can go off, get a certification that can be an empty thing if you can't, then apply that certification to the work that you're doing, Paul, what do you think about that?

Paul Collins

100%. In fact, that's one of the big deals these days that SFIA allows people to express themselves. And it's one of the benefits that we put out there and through, you know, neuro divergent people, that's a good way for them to express their skills. So yeah, qualifications contribute towards a piece of evidence that might support a skill, and it's a great way to express yourself and then you do know it's part of your culture.

Duncan Barr

And I think it hones in on people's ability to get the job done and that's what you want at the end of the day because you want practical people doing practical things to advance your organisation. You know, you see, you can come in with Cisco CCNA but not actually understand the impact of it because you haven't had the real-world experience.

Mary-Anne Merriott

Absolutely.

All right, let's look at the last question we've got here, which is can you share more detail on how SFIA and its impact on position description banding, what did you do to make this a success by position description banding? I'm guessing you mean how SFIA maps to position descriptions rather than how SFIA might create remuneration bands or levels of roles. So, I'll focus it there to start with. Duncan, when you, when you, when you've done this with your teams, what's the response from people being like to all of a sudden having SFIA skills associated with their roles?

Duncan Barr

I think what it raised was the overall complexity of what the digital world is about. And if I took a Level 3 Network Engineer and the SFIA skill set better described the impact and the complexity of the world we work in and that alone helped when it was translated back to the Strategic Pay framework, which is what the Council used as the pay framework. And that allowed pay banding changes. Some people might move tertiary grades, and that allowed market sensible market data to be brought into line. So that was one of the side benefits where some roles changed grades because we could better describe the complexity of the role.

Mary-Anne Merriott

That's a really good way of putting it. And I've seen that exact thing actually across multiple organisations. Once they do that and it creates a, as you say, a sense of better structure and perhaps a fairer structure in relation to what someone's actually doing.

Paul, do you want to add anything to that?

Paul Collins

Pretty much what you guys said and just taking a sort of a bit of a public sector or even big enterprise, you know that we do use this banding to recognise career progression. If I pick one, out of Australian government APS 6 when we're defining roles around APS 6, the levels in SFIA will be pretty consistent. You know we won't suddenly like create a role that's out of alignment with like that remuneration sort of band. And in some of the enterprises, before we even got into the defining of the roles up front, we did this massive mapping exercise between levels of responsibility and the bands, so that when we did build them, we got them consistent. You know we can look at SFIA from a development point of view and the remuneration stuff still goes through remuneration committees and everything.

Duncan Barr

That makes it more justifiable.

Mary-Anne Merriott

Yeah, it's giving it some more of an evidentiary basis, isn't it, rather than being a bit arbitrary or based on based on criteria that don't necessarily stack up in all of the ways you would like them to stack up.

Duncan Barr

Yeah.

Paul Collins

Exactly.

Mary-Anne Merriott

All right. Well, it doesn't look like we have any more questions for the moment and we have hit time. So, in that case, I might bring things to a close. So, thanks very much Duncan and Paul for joining and for sharing your stories. And thanks to everyone else who's joined us on the call today.