

TALKING HEADS:

AMANDA-JANE BALFOUR

Programme Director/Senior Responsible Owner



Amanda-Jane Balfour is one of Harmonic's most experienced programme and project management leaders, with extensive experience spanning government, public and private sectors. Here she shares her thoughts on roles past and present, women in leadership, and what makes Harmonic a great place to work.

What in your view are the critical elements of programme and project management leadership?

First and foremost, I support and lead the programme team to ensure deliverables are completed on time, in budget and to the highest possible standard. The people and the team are my priority – I'm a real people person! People make programmes and if you don't have a happy team it makes for a difficult programme.

I make sure I am on hand to listen, provide support and help the team solve issues, acting as a mediator and negotiator where necessary and generally looking after people's wellbeing. I encourage diversity within any team and look to instil a positive, open culture, with fun along the way. Praise and recognition are so important – no matter what your level within an organisation. The two most important words are 'thank you'!

I really enjoy engaging with my peers and key stakeholders, collaborating and building relationships to ensure the programme runs as smoothly and effectively as possible for everyone involved.



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You were a senior civil servant before joining Harmonic. What did this entail?

I spent ten years working as a senior civil servant, leading multimillion-pound major transformation, change and operational delivery programmes and services for the Department for Work and Pensions; the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs; the Home Office; and latterly the Department for Education. I've been lucky to work in many departments across Whitehall – each has its own culture and I've experienced and learnt from a range of working practices along the way.

A standout experience was directing the Brexit programme for the Department for Education, which involved working with ministers, the Cabinet Office, the Department for Exiting the European Union and the Civil Contingencies Secretariat. Obviously, this was a complex programme politically, with multiple curveballs along the way! It was also a very different programme to any that I had led before, as we were constantly having to react to events that were entirely out of our control, often with very little notice. I feel privileged to have worked on such a historic programme and I had one of the best teams to work with, many of whom are dear friends today. I loved working at the Department for Education – in fact, I returned there twice from other departments!

What key learnings do you feel you've brought from the Civil Service to the private sector?

Not surprisingly, the experience of working in government at a senior level has had a huge influence on who I am today and the attributes I bring to the workplace. As civil servants, we are very strongly aligned to the Civil Service values of integrity, honesty, objectivity and impartiality. There is a great emphasis on people leadership, delivering at pace, driving value for money, and ensuring equality and inclusivity for all. As a leader, I always try to embody the Civil Service values. They are in my DNA.

I'm particularly conscious of the importance of instilling an ethos of equality, diversity and inclusivity in my teams. I've always had various corporate roles in the Senior Civil Service (SCS) and really enjoyed my role as a BAME ambassador for the Department for Education and as a mentor for young female leaders within the civil service. It has been both a joy and rewarding to see my mentees develop into senior female leaders. I truly believe that having a diverse range of people makes a team more likely to find creative, innovative solutions to problems and I try and encourage this culture.

You very quickly became an integral part of the Harmonic team! What do you think is the key to a successful move from public to private sector?

I've been really surprised how well I've adapted, particularly as I was a bit apprehensive about leaving a career in the SCS that I absolutely loved. I think the key to a smooth transition is to be flexible, open-minded and to listen. During my first few weeks, I reached out and built a network across the KBR/Harmonic team and the support of colleagues has been great. Once again, it all comes down to the people and building relationships.

I also think it made a difference that I've seen projects and programmes from both sides of the fence! As a civil servant, I was the senior responsible owner for a few major procurements and have experienced both excellent and problematic supplier relationships. As I transitioned into the private sector, I recalled how I felt as a client and have been careful to apply these lessons to my own role. I believe I have a good relationship with clients based on my own experience as a client and what I liked and didn't like!

Did you always want to have a leadership role?

Not at all – I started my career as a forensic scientist, and this led naturally to leadership roles.

My first job was as a crime scene examination officer for Greater Manchester Police (GMP). Despite none of the crime scene suits or overshoes fitting me as they were made for six-foot tall policemen, I worked my way up to become Crime Scene Examination Unit Manager. My claim to fame is that I worked on the first exhumation in the Harold Shipman case – little did I know as I stood in the cemetery in the early hours that this would be the start of a historic case.

I went on to spend ten years in the Forensic Science Service (FSS), including leading two major programmes on the transformation of the service from an executive agency of the Home Office to a government-owned company and the National DNA Expansion programme (when DNA was just starting out – showing my age!). This initiated me into the world of ministers, government and the Civil Service, which in turn led to Whitehall and the Senior Civil Service. The SCS provided me with opportunities to challenge my leadership skills and I was really lucky to be funded to undertake the Major Projects Leadership Academy at Said Business School, Oxford University.

How has your perspective on equality and diversity been influenced by your experiences as a woman in leadership?

Operating as a senior female leader has provided me with a heightened awareness of the challenges that women still face (unfortunately) in the workplace daily.

On reflection, I started to challenge the 'norm' from an early age. I was one of only two girls who chose to study all the science subjects at school, and I was one of a handful of women sitting in a physics lecture of around 300 at Aberdeen University. A memorable moment was when I said to my careers advisor at school that I wanted to be a forensic scientist and she responded with 'that's a man's job, so if you like blood and gore then a nurse would be a better option for you'. Luckily, I ignored this and went on to fulfil my passion to become a forensic scientist and crime scene examiner.

Early in my career, I worked as one of the very few female civilians in a crime scene examination unit in GMP, which reinforced the importance of standing on your own two feet and challenging inappropriate

behaviours. I've gone on to take this spirit and learning through my career and completely support equal treatment of women in the workplace. Small changes – such as ensuring there's a good mix of people on recruitment panels – make a big difference.

Many extremely capable women lack confidence and suffer from impostor syndrome. Having a visible, approachable, relatable female role model can make all the difference. The cultural expectation for women in meetings to take the notes and make the tea may no longer be the norm, but its vestiges remain and we need to do all we can to eradicate them for good.

How do your strengths as an individual help in your role?

My greatest strengths are my ability to unpick and resolve problems, and my resilience. Once you've navigated political situations with ministers and responded to stories being leaked to the press overnight, it's easier to keep everyday delivery problems in perspective!

I also think working with people is a particular strength. I genuinely enjoy empowering those around me, coaching and mentoring them through problems and helping them to learn. It probably helps that I enjoy having a laugh and try to build fun into my team's day. A happy team is a successful team.

'Me time' is also important to me, such as going on a bike ride, weight training or going for a walk in any type of weather!

What key things do you believe differentiate Harmonic from the competition?

Harmonic truly embodies a bespoke, flexible, integrated partnership approach. We take time to build relationships with our customers and come up with creative, innovative solutions to help them move forward. It's also a huge advantage that we can reach back into KBR's global business and draw on extensive additional skills and expertise for projects.

As a team, we're passionate, dedicated, committed and loyal. We all want to succeed and genuinely care about achieving high-quality standards in our work. And it's all done with a sense of humour!

What are you most excited about for your future as part of Harmonic?

Because it's a relatively new acquisition within KBR, I'm excited to see how the business grows and how I can make the most of my extensive experience and skills to help shape that journey.

What makes Harmonic a great place to work?

It's small enough that you can get to know a lot of people quickly, but it's got the big KBR organisation behind it as well. The leadership team is keen to engage with people and the organisation has a reasonably flat hierarchy, which I like as it makes it more inclusive.

And finally... can you describe Harmonic in a few words?

Exciting, flexible, creative, innovative, sustainable, adaptable, resilient...

In summary, small but perfectly formed!