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Ian Oppermann (left) and Rupert Grayston

In this exclusive interview, Oppermann and Grayston talk about their vision for the ACS's future.

Q: Ian, can you summarise the current situation?

Oppermann: It's been an interesting ride, but we're in a much better place now. People have understood the issues I was raising and we have a CEO who's addressing the challenges, which is making all the difference in the world. I hope that the Congress meeting on 15 December will elect four new Management Committee members who will help us get everything back in order.

Q: What are those issues?

Oppermann: There were some pretty substantial cultural issues inside the organisation. And it's not a secret that we've got a Safe Work Improvement Notice from Safe Work NSW. It's really a rare thing to get.

Q: What about the issue of changing the structure of the ACS to a Company Limited by Guarantee?

Oppermann: The structural issue is important, but the timeframe less so, so long as we keep improving our governance. Any new constitution needs to be much more consultative, and we need to do a much better job of moving to it. When I took over as President back in March, concerns were reflected to me about member centricity, about empowerment of branches, and about the value proposition of being an ACS member.

I hope that comes back into focus. We should take as long as necessary to get that right. We need to make sure we rebuild an ACS that truly meets the requirements of its members, while ensuring we are a voice at the table at the national level.


Q: Rupert, You were appointed as interim CEO, and I know you

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said to some people you didn't want the job. Are you intending to stay on?

Grayston: I'm happy solving problems right now. I feel I'm making a difference. I appreciate the support and trust of the Management Committee and members, and I'm in no particular hurry to wind that up. I didn't put my hat in the ring for the role of CEO, but the recruitment process has been put on hold for the time being. We're solving some things and we're going through an important process. I've told Ian and the Management Committee that we can keep arrangements in place for a short while, and then reassess.

Q: So you've made no decision yet on whether you'll stay on or whether the Management Committee will go back to an assessment process for CEO role?

Grayston: I'm assuming that the Management Committee will go to market at some time. If that happens I may put my hat in the ring, or I may not. Things have changed a little for me, and right now I'm happy to contribute and do what I can to help things through.

Q: Can you do the job from Canberra?

Grayston: Certainly. During COVID, you can do it from anywhere. I suspect you can in the future too. I've commuted to Sydney for many years, and the CEO will need to be in Sydney frequently, but not every day.

Q: Most of the focus has been on the composition of the Management Committee, but senior management has been in some disarray. The Chief Operating Officer and Chief Digital Officer have left and the Chief Financial Officer seems to be on indefinite and unexplained leave. That's a lot of senior managers to be missing at a crucial time. What's the current situation with the senior management team?

Grayston: We have placed people into acting roles for the time being. We're fortunate that we have good people to bring into those acting roles. We've got three acting directors, including one replacing me as Director of Professional Standards and Assessments. We've got a couple of others covering the COO portfolio for the moment, and other roles are being filled in the interim.

Q: All of them filled internally?


Grayston: Yes. We don't feel a burning urgency to go to the market to fill those roles. One of the important areas of feedback that we had internally from staff surveys and the like is about developing our people. So it seems a good opportunity to coach and support people into acting roles, particularly when they're performing well. Through this period of change and consolidation we can give those people an opportunity to show what they can do. And it's working very well for us.

We do have an external person on contract in our executive team, working on people and culture. We didn't have that sort of level of capability internally. We needed more resources in the HR and culture area. And so we've contracted somebody very good, who operates at high level, with a terrific track record. She will be with us for a few months helping us to work through all these cultural issues.


Q: So how is staff morale? Many people expressed concerns to me, and I know there's been high staff turnover. Do you have any evidence of any improvement in staff morale in recent times?

Grayston: That's an important question. We're doing a lot of things which I think are improving staff morale. We are getting very encouraging positive feedback, particularly around better communication and breaking down silos. We are undertaking various internal activities to help support people. There's a way to go on this, but we are putting in place some important policies and staff support activities. We're progressing, and we are planning to conduct some further activities to measure how our staff culture is improving.


Q: One of the key criticisms of the ACS over the last decade or more, even preceding the recent problems, has been the decline in professional membership. The numbers are pretty stark. You are

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obviously very aware of this, and everyone says they're concerned about it. But what can be done about it? What plans do you have to arrest or even reverse the decline?

Grayston: Our penetration into the market is not great. Although the digital and data professions are relatively young and have a long way to go in terms of evolution compared to more established professions, we want our market penetration to be greater.

Right now I'm more interested in our certified member numbers than our professional grade member numbers. With our professional membership grades, we're not actually attesting to anything about those members. Successful professional bodies have strong certification systems, with certified members recognised by both state and federal governments through the official standards scheme built on a foundation of a self regulating and trusted profession.

While we do want to look after the interests and aspirations of all of our members, I believe our prime focus should be on growing certification. We've grown our certified numbers by around 30% this year, and we've put a lot of effort into doing so. It's not easy to establish the value proposition for certification, but it is easier than for professional member grades, because it's got substance to it.

Certification is something that governments and other employers are going to need more in the future. We can see the clear signals of professionalisation across the Australian Public Service, and there is a growing public risk profile in the digital data profession. That all means that a strong framework for the profession is needed. It's important for us to focus on that. And while we still need to be delivering value to our traditional member grades, that may not be so useful to us or relevant to society into the future.

Q: What's your view on this, Ian?

Oppermann: I definitely agree that professionalisation of the sector is something that the Commonwealth Government has very clearly flagged. I had two Technical Advisory Committee meetings today, and the calibre of the people around the table was phenomenal. It's taken a little while to get those groups to be seen as being credible and delivering on things, but based on the their track record they have the potential to influence the national conversation.

The data sharing group has already influenced the conversation in NSW on international standards. There were strong competition to get into those technical committees, and it's an area where the ACS can really have influence. I'm particularly excited about the relevance of the ACS to the national conversation, so that when people ask about the role for the ACS that's where they see it headed.

Q: Certification has been an issue for a long time. But there are many CIOs and IT professionals who aren't so concerned about certification because it's not so necessary in the commercial world. They don't see any reason any longer to belong to the ACS. The numbers show that the number of such members has declined severely. You can't ignore those guys. How do you get them back?

Grayston: For people to give up time and money to belong to an organisation, they have to get something out of it. If the ACS can help create a set of standards, and you are a certified individual in your professional area, that's a very substantial opportunity to re-engage with people who want to help build a better society for the future.

Our biggest and most active clients at the moment in workforce development and services are Commonwealth Government departments and agencies. That's a terrific sign. The Government has recently put in place plans and actions to develop a digital progression program across the Australian Public Service. The ACS is taking the right kind of steps to walk the path that the engineers walked down some while ago and the accountants before them.

One day ICT will be regulated, because the risk profile is growing and this certification will be needed. But we hope this will be through self regulation, rather than by statutory or co-regulatory models. That's our opportunity. But it takes time to evolve those professional frameworks and cultures. We can't wait until somebody does it to us. We need to develop that over time, as the engineers did over many hard years that at times seemed not to be progressing. But over time those things accumulated until engineering got to the position is today.

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And so we really call on individuals and members not to judge us too much on the direct personal benefit that certification will give you today. Rather, look at the rationale for supporting professionalism in ICT as a move towards public trust. Everybody wants recognition, and to be able to control their own destiny. If we develop ourselves as a profession we will be in a position to step up and self-regulate.

Oppermann: There's a dearth of high end ICT, data analytics, and data governance skills in Australia. The ACS can play a much stronger role. We've been working with people around developing new skills and framework descriptions for data analytics and data science. That is not getting as much attention as I would like, but it's getting there. Working with the Commonwealth on educational pathways and skills assessment frameworks is where we can really add value.

Q: Is there much concern about the high proportion of revenue that's coming from just the one income stream of the certification of international ICT professionals? What if the ACS was to lose that monopoly? The income stream could dry up. What can be done about it?

Grayston: That's a good observation. Our financial statements show that we do have an exposure. Another way to look at it is that these strong revenue streams give us choices and opportunities, but we need to remember that they may not be there forever. There is a risk that the immigration skills assessment and the Professional Year Program might be taken from us.

We are fulfilling a public role, but one day these things will move on or change. We can already see migration, trends evolving, though demand is still strong for what we're doing. Our revenues haven't taken as bad a hit from COVID as we thought they might, but the time will come when these things will mature. The volume of international students is expected to slow in coming years. We do need to strengthen other revenue streams. One of the perils of strong revenue streams is that it takes the urgency out of strengthening your alternate revenue streams and strategic activity in other areas. That will need to be a key feature of our next five year plan and the next phase of our development.

Oppermann: I don't have a lot more to add to that. Any organisation that falls asleep is at real risk of extinction. We can just look around and see that the companies that can adapt to the world changing around them are well placed. And staying awake, keeping your hands on the wheel is going to be an important part of ensuring long term sustainability for the organisation.

Q: What of the future?

Oppermann: I think the ACS has really turned the corner. And while this was not an issue I thought I'd be addressing this year, it certainly has proved to be a pretty powerful set of issues that I have been focused on for the last few months. I'm looking forward to really having a different conversation with Congress and with members and firing up the engines that will really make a difference.

Grayston: The ACS has gone through a hiccup in its governance in and that's created some internal differences.

Q: A hiccup!

Grayston: I think historically it is a hiccup. It shows that we have the democratic processes in place for things to be corrected when needed. When there's differences between our elected members, they have the means and we've been able to resolve our differences. Nothing that's happened has gone outside of the written process of our rules.


While it might have seemed alarming at times, this is healthy democracy at work. In a membership based organisation we should feel encouraged by that ability to self-correct, and for members to be able to participate in that process. Many issues have been aired around internal culture, but we've continued to deliver member service throughout all of that. Throughout the COVID pandemic we transitioned to work from home, and there wasn't a day or an hour lost in service delivery.

We are match fit for the next for the next phase of the game. We've shown that we've got the depth and that we have moved on, without bringing in a whole new leadership team. We're doing very well with getting internal people to step up.

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We have enormous and exciting opportunities. There are many changes. Many new specialties and disciplines are evolving, at a time where increasing there's a need for the frameworks of profession for trusted expertise. That's not in the background. It is in the boardroom and at the executive level, and it is influencing public policy.

It's a terrific opportunity. I think the ACS has done a lot and done it very well, and is well placed for the future. We've all got an opportunity to be a part of framing that future.

GP's view

They were both frank and open. There is obviously still a lot to do, but the signs are encouraging. I was a little concerned about the emphasis on certification and a lack of detail on how to make the organisation more relevant to the types of IT professionals that have left the ACS by the thousands in recent years. But it is at least a clear vision.

It was also encouraging to see the understanding of the dangers of the current revenue model. This really needs to be addressed. I'm impressed with Grayston – he seems a steady hand on the wheel when that is what is really needed. And Oppermann has worked wonders under very trying conditions. In our informal chat before the interview he stressed to me how his work as NSW Chief Data Scientist has been instrumental in addressing the problems of the pandemic. There were times during the year when the combined pressures of that job and of ACS politics drove him to despair. Those times have fortunately passed.

This has been a tumultuous year in the history of the ACS, as it has been for the whole planet. Let us hope next year is better, on all fronts.

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