accenture

A Walk in the Cloud

Accenture and Google: Culture captures the castle

**Ellen Bencard,
Walk in the Cloud Host**

Ellen Bencard leads Accenture's marketing campaigns in the UK while also managing to nourish her journalistic roots as an established blogger on the arts, travel and fine dining. Her corporate work usually finds her behind the scenes, coaching her team to bring together big ideas, insightful commentators, exciting events and innovative channels in ways that inspire prospective clients. But this isn't the first time she's stepped into the limelight to show off her training as a reporter, writer and presenter. She's anchored a web-based YouTube series for BT called Top Tips for CIOs and was Northwestern University's on-site media spokesperson at the Royal Wedding of Prince Harry and fellow alumna Meghan Markle. Born and educated in the American Midwest, Ellen's lived in the UK since 1999 and is a proud dual citizen.

Akosua Kudom, Senior Manager, Talent & Organisation, Accenture

Akosua is a Senior Manager in Accenture's Talent & Organisation practice, focused on supporting clients with culture, change management, operating model and new-skilling as part of their cloud transformations. She's particularly passionate about realising the full value of the cloud by addressing the human elements.

Finn Toner, Consultant at Google Cloud

Finn is a consultant in Google Cloud's Professional Services Organisation, focused on customer culture and change. He's particularly interested in how innovation practices can scale, and how culture can act as a differentiator for high performing software delivery teams.

Introduction: Walk in the Cloud.

Ellen: We all get by with a little help from our friends. And that applies as much to big organisations as to people. This is Ellen Bencard with Accenture's Walk in the Cloud, where this season we're talking partnerships, and today's topic is innovation. How good are UK organisations at it? What can they do better? And how does the cloud help? I'm joined by Finn Toner, who looks after Customer Culture and Change at Google. Hello, Finn.

Finn: Good morning, Ellen.

Ellen: And Accenture's Akosua Kudom. Welcome, Akosua.

Akosua: Morning, Ellen.

Ellen: Now I understand you are both passionate about the idea that innovation isn't the preserve of an elite few. That by empowering everybody to be innovators, businesses can unlock the greatest opportunities, which is something I doubt anyone would disagree with. But the challenge is turning that great aspiration into a reality. Finn, let's start with an assessment. How well do organisations do innovation right now?

Finn: I think the first thing I'd say is that organisations can struggle with innovation, doing something genuinely innovative because it's very hard, genuinely. And I think that it's often compounded by an organisation's tendency to react to something new and to see it as a threat. Almost the organisation's immune system can see a nascent idea that threatens a core business and the tendency is to kill that.

I think that inherent temptation is very strong and I think it takes either an idea to go viral really quickly, or it takes a lot of time and concentrated effort and thought to get over that temptation to kill something new.

Ellen: And Akosua, there's another problem that I often see and it's all very well expecting people to be innovative, but doesn't creativity need time and space? I mean, if the pressure of my day-to-day job is sucking up every minute, how do I build in innovation?

Akosua: That's a really important point I learned and you're absolutely right. So we often speak to clients that are very keen to innovate, to come up with new ideas. And then as we observe their people, their culture, their values, there's this big emphasis on constantly doing and being productive and responding, whether that's to customers, employees, and all of that is goodness. Obviously you need to do that, but creating that time out for people to think, to think about things differently, look at how things could be improved. And particularly if you want to do something that's completely groundbreaking, you almost need that disconnect from your day to day, your environment. So I know this is one thing Google, for example, does very well. So having that 20% of your time, that's actually time for you to step away from kind of being on that treadmill and that day to day and having that time to think.

Ellen: Oh, Finn, tell me more about that. How does that work?

Finn: Well, it's the, it's really funny. I was thinking nobody ever has their best ideas at work in that dedicated time. To the 20% role, the principle is to try and as Akosua said, create that space where people can work on something that is important, but it's not related to their day-to-day job. So it almost explicitly creates a different headspace away from what you have to focus on nine to five. Now within Google, at the moment there are 20% rules, which then become officially part of your role. So it's a bit more formalised now. Of course, you and I are working with a large financial services organisation in the UK, and they're trying to tackle the same tension. And they realised that getting to something like 20% is maybe too much of a stretch for them now. Where they've started is to create a day, a month where everybody is empowered to learn or to connect with other members of their communities of practice. And really it creates a bit of explicit time for people to reflect and to bounce ideas around. That's their first step towards more of a broader culture of innovation.

Ellen: Now, what other examples have you seen that you could offer to our listeners where clients of yours have tried to tackle this innovation?

Akosua: So I can give an example of different things that clients have tried, particularly during COVID just in terms of creating that time away from being constantly on your laptop. So a number of organisations have tried this, no meeting Friday approach. So carving out that time once a week, where your calendar isn't filled with meetings,

you've actually got the headspace, you've got the opportunity to do something slightly different. The other examples that we've seen from some clients is actually creating a different environment. So this gets to the whole point of, you need to step away from your day to day. So having carved out innovation labs spaces, where people can actually go where they're not in front of their desk, they're interacting with different people. Obviously that's now more virtual in the new hybrid world we're living in. But again, it's creating both that space, both in terms of location, but also time away from your normal day-to-day meetings and activity.

Ellen: And Finn, you had a point.

Finn: Yeah, I guess Ellen, I think the point I'd make here is that there isn't a single unifying operating model to do innovation well. There are different flavors and organisations can have multiple innovation operating models. So of course you had mentioned the lab context and having a, maybe a bit more of a centralised facility where ideas are incubated and developed, and then prototyped and then ultimately scaled. Then I guess course, maybe there's the, is worth talking about the, kind of the, ?What If! innovation consulting model. Be it an internal function, which is able to assemble a crack team to tackle or take on a really complex problem in a in an innovative way and taking a different look at it to the people who might ordinarily be assembled around it. And then I guess there's, at the other end of the spectrum, there's gonna be, I guess this is getting into little I innovation,

where there are mechanisms for spotting ways to improve recurring processes within an organisation. Internally, we run a process called bureaucracy busters program where once a year, everybody is able to vote for and kind of tackle the pain points that get in the way, to really keep track and to, so that as we grow, we're not letting red tape get in the way. I think that still fits into the bucket of innovation, but it's a very different flavor offered. I don't think there has to be one flavor, which is the only thing you get to taste for the rest of time.

Ellen: I know I definitely want to play the bureaucracy busters game. Let me ask you both to talk a little bit more about cloud as this is a Walk in the Cloud we are doing today. How does cloud technology help us be innovative?

Akosua: What we're seeing, from different clients is a big focus on how they can actually use all of the additional cloud capacity and data and access to apps, which they can quickly experiment with to truly come up with new ways of making decisions, and also new services and products. So to give you an example of that, we've been doing a lot of work with a number of telcos and the big focus with them is really, how can we take all the great data that we have and insight we have about customers and really use, the tools and services that we have access to via the cloud, to properly mine that to create more personalised products and services, and also to come up with new products and services.

So we have one example of one teleco that used that insight and was able to partner with a well-known driving app company. I won't name specifics, but they then partnered with them to come up with services where they could actually understand where people were, where there was a high need and traffic for, access to cars and transportation, and really be able to meet that need for their customers. Really by looking differently at that data and understanding their clients better based on the data that they were able to access on the cloud.

Ellen: I'm glad you brought up that example. That's certainly been a topic of conversation on past podcasts about how use of data creatively is so important. Finn, any examples come to mind for you on the cloud technologies?

Finn: Yeah. I guess I'll maybe build on the data points. I think there's a temptation to assume technology will solve all the problems, whereas I think, and Akosua and I have talked about this many times, it's the starting point of a longer term journey. I talked to my colleagues in Looker and their frame, or the way they think about the evolution of data culture starts with the technology and building awareness, about what it can do. And then they often talk about the importance of pairing that with almost a large scale education campaign, to make sure that sometimes you hear the words democratisation of data in association with the cloud. And that I think is a grand term for it being available and accessible to everybody.

But if the sufficient level of understanding and capability isn't there, then that democratisation is only going to go so far. So I think it's really important to kind of pair the technology change hand in hand with something else to make sure that the technology is the starting point, but it's not the end point of the journey.

Ellen: Because ultimately it comes back to people.

Finn: Exactly.

Ellen: Yeah. So let me wind us up by talking about partnership. What do you think the two of you have been able to do together that you would not have been able to do if you were working on your own? Finn, let me start with you.

Finn: Ellen, I think the thing that really excites me about the partnership is the scale of the impact that we can have together. But I think about the breadth of the Accenture organisation, I've mentioned, ?What If! earlier. It's a really well known, respected brand in the innovation space, but that's not the end of where Accenture's strengths can bring. I'm also thinking about some of our exploratory conversations with SkyHive, and the ability to connect third parties into the partnership is something that really excites me.

Ellen: And Akosua, how about you?

Akosua: I think for us, the real opportunity has been able to tap into all of the great experience that Google has in the cloud space. So really partnering that up with some of the innovation services we have that Finn has talked about.

So ?What If!, Mudano, in terms of bringing that data again, to understand what makes the difference. And then combining that with all of the great learnings that Google has really applied on itself, and that we can help them to really activate that with clients.

Ellen: Got it. And if we leave people with one thought, Akosua, let me start with you. If there's one thing that a listener could do to get started with better innovation, what would that one thing be?

Akosua: I would say it's really important to start by listening to your people. We touched at the top of the call on the importance of the culture, understanding what some of those blockers are to innovation. Sometimes that can be hard listening when you get that feedback from people of all different backgrounds, levels. But starting there to see what needs to be done differently and how you can actually give people that space and the time and the tools that they need, creates the right foundation to really get the benefits from your cloud investments to be able to innovate.

Ellen: Sounds spot on. Finn, you can't have listening to your people. What other top thing would you do?

Finn: I think it's important to expect, pushback is maybe too strong a word, but to expect and to be prepared, to explain and to understand and address people's concerns. There's a weekly newsletter that I subscribe to called the Pessimist's Archive, and they look back at new technologies that were introduced a hundred years ago and the moral panic that was associated with those at the time.

And they draw parallels with things that are happening today, and the parallels are almost exactly the same. So I think that points to a natural reaction to not trust something that we don't fully understand. So I think it's, be prepared to address and acknowledge that concern.

Ellen: Well, thank you both for walking with me today. And as Finn just pointed out, this is a conversation humanity has been having for a long time and we will no doubt keep having it, but hopefully today's conversation will inspire a few of our listeners. Thanks, both.

Finn: Thank you, Ellen.

Ellen: I hope you're enjoying our little walks. If so, the whole team here at Walk in the Cloud would love it if you could give us a little boost on social media. Like us on your favourite podcast platform, share us on LinkedIn, every little bit helps. And if you have comments or suggestions for future episodes, please find me on LinkedIn, Ellen Ferrara Bencard, and drop me a note. Next time we're going from innovation to agility. How can the world's largest organisations be as agile as young startups? We'll get some ideas from the intersection of Accenture and Oracle. I hope you'll join us.