

Off Mute Episode 2

[Intro music.]

Welcome to Off Mute, a podcast about women in cybersecurity where Sophie, Isabella and Sam, three cyber fast streamers just beginning our careers in the government's security profession. Join us as we hear from women across government about their careers so far, the challenges they've faced and the great achievements they've made.

[Intro music.]

Sam: So Bella, thank you so much for joining us today. Could you start off by telling us a little bit about your role and what you do?

Bella: Yes, I can. Uh, so firstly, it's a very new role for me. So I joined in September of last year. I'm Director for Cyber within Government Security Group. And essentially I'm responsible for delivering the government's cybersecurity strategy.

So that was published in January of last year. It set some pretty punchy targets for how we want to improve cybersecurity across government. And by 2025, focusing on critical systems. And then 2030 focusing on broader government and public. But that's kind of the headline of what we're trying to achieve.

So within my directorate we have teams that are focusing on cyber operations and assurance. Uh, so looking at rolling out a new government assurance regime, which is based on the NCSC Cyber Assessment Framework. We are establishing a new government cyber coordination centre, which is looking at helping us to improve how we deliver against threats, vulnerabilities, and incidents across governments.

We're developing new policies and standards to do better in cyber across government. And then we also have a transformation team that's looking at delivering the program of work that helps us to deliver on the strategy. Uh, so it's quite a broad remit, um, and it's probably worth noting that I think one of the biggest challenges of the role is that we don't really have control of most of the levers that will help us to deliver on the strategy.

So we do have some central funding, but a lot of what we're doing is influencing and supporting departments to deliver effectively, um, working with partners across government, so the NCSC Central Digital and Data Office who deliver the, um, the broader digital strategy. So most of what we do on a kind of day-to-day basis is, is making friends and influencing people, focusing on cybersecurity primarily.

Sam: Oh, lovely. You know what's hopefully quite reassuring for you actually is the Home Office have launched their departmental cybersecurity strategy a couple of weeks ago, and so much of what you're saying I recognise from that.

Bella: That's encouraging.

Sam: It's really clear how that's already influenced, you know, the department that I'm in and yeah, I'm sure lots of others.

Bella: That's really good. That's really good to hear.

Sam: Um, so as you said, it's a relatively new role for you.

Bella: Mm-hmm.

Sam: How have you been settling in? How have you found it?

Bella: Um, yeah, pretty well actually. So I'm really lucky in that, um, so whilst it's a, a new role and a new directorate, there were a lot of kind of people already sitting within Government security group who are responsible for cybersecurity.

So there were teams already established and I happily just got to kind of bundle those all together into a directorate and crack on. And I guess the most important thing for me is that the teams that I'm working with, both within the cyber directorate and board of GSG, are really fantastic. I've never worked with such a capable team.

They're, you know, they're really vibrant, they're really excited about what they're delivering. They're really experts and it's just fantastic the kind of level of capability focused on what we're trying to deliver, which is really, really nice.

Um, it has been a bit of a step change, I would say from my previous role. So previously I worked at Defra and I was the senior security advisor there. So looking at all flavours of security, not just cyber. Um, and that was, you know, it was challenging because it was sort of departmental focused. It was very operational. It was kind of delivering the day-to-day grind within a department and helping them to improve their security in the round.

This is kind of much more heads up thinking about broader government and how you kind of deliver across the entirety of the departmental space. So it's, it's a really different challenge. Uh, but I've really enjoyed it so far. And I have to say, this is probably the first job I've ever had where I can hand on heart say, I absolutely love it.

I'm just so excited about all the stuff that we do on a day-to-day basis, um, working with really fantastic people trying to do something which feels quite important as well, which is really nice. Uh, so yeah, I'm, I'm, I would say settling in as, as well as you possibly can do with two small grotty children who bring home diseases on a regular basis and, and mean that, uh, that kind of stuff is a, is a challenge and a struggle.

Sam: Oh, definitely. Well, we'll definitely talk more about that later on, I think.

Bella: Lovely.

Sam: Um, when you began into your new role as a new leader, um, what were some of the initial things that you did at the start of your role to get to know those established teams and establish a way of working?

Bella: So, to give you a bit of background, so previously, uh, I worked in consulting at the Boston Consulting Group and BAE Systems, so, I've done quite a lot of going into new organisations and having to sort of feel up to speed relatively quickly.

And what I've always found is that the most important thing is to ask a lot of questions and to spend a lot of time listening to what people are doing already, uh, to make sure that you are kind of having conversations at all levels of the organisation, understanding what the kind of current objectives are, what the current challenges.

And making sure that you are kind of building on what people have already done. I think there's sometimes a tendency, particularly people coming into a leadership role, feel like they need to make a big splash and make a big change, or, you know, kind of take the organisation in a new direction. And sometimes that's really helpful and is the right thing to do, but often what you find is that actually the people that you are now working with, know far more about the problems that the organisation has or the things that it's trying to achieve than you ever will in your, you know, kind of 30 seconds since you've, you've started the job. So listening to them and then building on the work that they've already done and sort of understanding their understanding of the challenges is a really important first step.

Until you've done that, you're sort of wasting a massive resource that's available to you. So I think that's my main, my main focus.

Sam: Brilliant. Did you have any expectations about what people would say to you when you were asking those questions?

Bella: Um, this role's particularly interesting because there's an actual genuine published strategy that says this is what you're gonna be doing when you take on the job, and that's really rare.

Uh, so I was expecting people to say, well, you know, your job is to deliver the strategy. And happily, when I joined, they said, well, your job is to deliver the strategy. So it was quite comforting to, to know that that was, um, that was what was expected. I think though there were quite a few things that, that I, I didn't expect, and they were particularly around the politics with a small p of who delivers what in government. And the reality of kind of coming from a departmental perspective where you sort of heads down delivering and then trying to think about how you support departments in delivering, but from a central perspective. So that kind of shift has been, I would say, not unexpected, but I didn't quite understand the scale of the challenge and quite how hard it is to support departments on an aggregate scale when you're sort of looking at multiple organisations and trying to help them all at once.

So that, that's been particularly interesting. I think the other bit that I, I didn't quite appreciate, but I think is incredibly important. I, I suppose I, I'd previously experienced the fact that the cyber profession itself is not very diverse. The technology profession across government and, you know, just generally nationally is not diverse.

Um, so. There's been a real opportunity to think about how we can influence that within this role, which I hadn't really appreciated. I'd known that there's a massive gap in cyber skills across government and public sector, but what I hadn't quite appreciated is the opportunity we have to influence that, and then what that means from a diversity and inclusion perspective as well.

So I think there's something really exciting there that I'd not quite clocked when I took the role on, but I was super excited about working. Um, and we've recently spoken to ministers and seniors across government about how we can be much more kind of ambitious in how we tackle the cyber skills gap.

And I think focusing on that, but also thinking about how we can make the profession, you know, the most diverse, the most inclusive, the most exciting place to work in cybersecurity, not just in government, but you know, across the UK is a really brilliant thing. And that's not something that I'd appreciated when I, when I took on the role, but I'm, I'm pretty happy about it.

Sam: That's incredibly ambitious, but really exciting as well! Have you got any plans in the works already?

Bella: Yeah, we do. So we've been commissioned to do some work to write essentially a strategy for how we're gonna tackle the problem. Step number one though, is getting a much better grip on what it looks like in practice, as we don't have much data.

We have a bit of data that says, well, the profession itself, so the security profession isn't very diverse. We have a lot of data from departments that says there's a skills gap in, you know, various operational cyber teams across government, and that we, we need to support departments in kind of filling those gaps.

But the detail of exactly what roles it is and exactly what the challenges are to filling them, why people in the private sector don't seek to come and work in the public sector, why people in public sector who are working in cyber choose to go elsewhere after a period of time. We've sort of got hunches on that, but we don't have the data to help drive a strategy.

So we're doing some work at the moment. Um, we're looking at some immediate interventions that will improve the situation. We are looking at gathering a much better data set to inform a strategy and then we're gonna do some options analysis to understand where we can focus. And there's some brilliant people in my team and across broader government that are working on it at the moment.

So I'm really excited about what we come up with. But it's quite a big kind of challenge and I'm, I'm really keen that we are data driven with this. We don't just sort of stick our fingers in the air and say, well, this sounds like it would be a great thing, so let's go and I dunno, build a giant academy for um, you know, sort of a particular skill set.

We need to be really careful about placing our bets in the best possible way.

Sam: Completely. Cause you don't wanna, you know, undermine your message by getting it wrong. That's, that's so exciting.

Bella: That's it is, it's fun. And in the meantime, I'm on a one woman recruitment drive. So every single thing like this that I do, every stage that I'm standing on at the moment, doing, uh, you know, various speaking events and, you know, empowering women in security and talking at, um, you know, general things about, uh, sort of civil service values, at the end I will always finish with, 'and if anyone wants to come and work in government cybersecurity, please come and speak to me afterwards, or, uh, drop me a note on LinkedIn'. So same goes for this podcast.

Sam: Oh, lovely. Well, listeners, they have it. Um, so let's take a few steps back maybe, um, I'd love to hear about your journey into the civil service. So you've mentioned that you've come from a consulting background.

Bella: Yeah.

Sam: What's your career history been like?

Bella: Uh, so. Yeah, a little bit, I guess a bit chequered. Um, so, so going in in various different directions and like many people in cybersecurity, I, I fell into this as a discipline. So I did a technical degree, uh, did maths and computer science. Um, fell into a consulting job

because it was the, the first thing that I happened to apply for, and I wasn't quite sure what I wanted to do.

Um, so I started working for a small IT consultancy called Detica um, which very rapidly was bought out by BAE Systems, the, the kind of the big defence giant. And so I immediately started working in a much larger organisation than I'd expected. Uh, and Detica was, um, partly bought by BAE as a route to improve their cybersecurity and digital intelligence capability. So it was kind of seen as the growth and strategy for BAE to, to buy this small organisation, then use it as a, an opportunity to grow. So I was in a really lucky position in. You know, my, my initial role, which was, um, business and technology consulting into government organisations really quickly transformed into working on really interesting cybersecurity capability development projects and strategy projects, both for, um, clients of BAE but also helping BAE to build its cyber business.

So I spent quite a lot of time working with the teams who are building. The sort of the early versions of behavioural based protective monitoring systems that are kind of pretty ubiquitous now, as well as, uh, sort of looking at how you can use different governments technology, so things like lawful interception capability in a cybersecurity commercial context.

So that was really, really interesting. And, uh, you know, my, my kind of career at BAE ended up being sort of focused partly on internal strategy development and business building, but then also on continuing to consult with external organisations on how they can manage their cyber risk. Uh, from BAE I went to the Boston Consulting Group, um, to, was there for three years doing digital transformation, but also cybersecurity.

Uh, and some of the most interesting things I worked on there were things like, uh, cyber risk quantification for really large financial services organisation. So understanding how you can look at, you know, potentially a massive investment portfolio of cybersecurity investment and say, well, actually this bit's more valuable than this bit. So this is how you can optimise your portfolio on the basis of risk, which is a really, ah, Most people probably won't find that that interesting, but I think it's a really fascinating challenge. Uh, so I really enjoyed that, had a lot of, a lot of fun doing that.

Um, and then I went from, uh, the Boston Consulting Group to DEFRA and, and I should probably also say that probably one of the reasons that I, I did that was that I'd always been looking for a role in

government. Spent a lot of time whilst I was in private sector, really wanting to work in, in the public sector, but not kind of seeing the right opportunity whilst I was at BC.

The first round of the Transforming Government Security program, um, within Cabinet office was being initiated. So that was a piece of work that really focused on how we can improve security across government. And they did a bulk recruitment round for security advisors. So I can't remember how many people they ended up bringing in.

But essentially it was a, probably one of the biggest security recruitment exercises that governments ever done. And it brought in security advisor for across government, um, to sort of establish a new way of working for security across government departments. So I joined DEFRA as part of that recruitment round and, and was really, really excited about the opportunity.

So the, the brilliant thing about that recruitment round was that sort of said we want people who have particular, you know, sort of areas of specialism. So for me it was cybersecurity and risk management, but they said, we'll also build out your skills in physical and personnel security and sort of help you to be more rounded as a security.

Um, so I had a really great opportunity there to sort of build capability, um, and also a great opportunity to work at an organisation like DEFRA where everybody really cares about, you know, what they're doing as an organisation. And the people who tend to work there are people who really care about the policy initiatives and the, the work that DEFRA delivers.

So it's a really nice place to be because everybody cares about the same stuff. Um, so I was a DEFRA for four years, and then this role came up, uh, within Cabinet Office. And this role was kind of part of a, a review of GSG, uh, so government security group, which sort of said, actually we need to think about how we deliver cybersecurity across government, and we need to focus more on it.

So it's a, it's a new role. Um, it's never been in place before and it's sort of part of a broader move towards focusing much more on cybersecurity. And to be honest, I, I might not have considered applying for it. A friend in Gsg at the time said, oh, this, this role's coming up by, it might, might be quite interesting.

You like cybersecurity, don't you? And I said, yes, I do. Yes. That does like a very interesting role. Well, I'll have a crack. Um, and here I am. So none of it has been particularly planned. There is no, there is no grand career plan that I'm working towards. It's all a bit of kind of happy, happy accidents and happy circumstances, but I'm, I'm really excited about where I am right now and feel really, really lucky to have.

Sam: That's wonderful. It's so nice to hear about what motivates you and your journey so far. Um, because I mean, big things ahead still.

Bella: Wow. Maybe, maybe.

Sam: So as a female leader in a male dominated industry, what challenges have you faced and how did you overcome them?

Bella: I mean, I'm not sure I've faced any particular challenges, but I've been asked this question a few times recently cause I've done quite a lot of stuff for, um, international Women's Day and been trying to reflect much more on my personal experience.

And I wonder if part of it is just that, I dunno any different, you know, I've worked in very male dominated professions for the whole of my professional career. In my degree. I was one of four women on the course. You know, it's not, I'm not really used to working in a, in a sort of more diverse and inclusive environment.

That's just not what I've, what I've grown up in. So I do wonder sometimes if there, there may have been challenges and I've just not recognized them as such, or, you know, things that perhaps now I might recognize as being unhelpful or unhelpful behaviours, and I've just not clocked them, but I'm not too concerned about that.

Now, the only thing that worries me is that, I need to be alive to those things because I need to be able to, you know, help the people around me to identify them and to improve the way that we're working. So I'm trying my best to kind of unlearn the behaviours and the process that I have learned from being in a kind of undiverse very sort of blinkered environment for a long time and think about, you know, how I can understand broader challenges and think more about how I can make our workplaces inclusive as possible. So I think that's probably the main challenge is that I've, I've probably learned a lot of things that I need to unlearn, and I've definitely noticed that in my leadership style and my

working style as well, I would say that I've, you know, I've learned to work in a particular way over a period of time.

I've spent a lot of time working with the military, a lot of time working in technical teams, which were again, very, very sort of male dominated. And I think I've learned behaviours which were useful. But probably not that helpful. More generally speaking. And I think now that I'm in more of a leadership position and also now I have the opportunity to kind of change the, the sort of the culture and the inclusive nature of the team, I need to actively unlearn those things so that I'm not reinforcing those behaviours.

So that's something that I'm kind of mulling over at the moment and trying to figure out how I can best do that.

Sam: So you've talked a little bit about your leadership style.

Bella: Mm-hmm.

Sam: And the personal reflections that you've done on that. Would you say you've modelled your leadership style on any leader that's been influential to you?

Bella: I would say not the entire leadership style and anyone in particular, but I have learned a lot from people that I've worked with in the past. Uh, so I had a, a particular line manager when I was at BAE Systems who. I would say really influential. Um, not only because he was very kind of technically competent and capable, but also he exhibited a lot of the kind of emotional intelligence and, you know, kind of, uh, broader understanding of his team qualities that, that I really care about in leadership.

So I think he was the sort of the first example where I saw someone who was, you know, really actively caring about the individuals in his team, building relationships with them, thinking about, you know, how he could make life as as good for them as possible. Help them to sort of realise their aspirations, um, exploit some of the brilliant ideas that they had in a really successful way, um, but also do that in a way that, you know, sort of best navigated the, the organisation at the time and the challenges that that organisation had at the time. So that, that was really, that was really helpful to me.

Um, and I've, I've worked with quite a lot of people more recently, so, especially at DEFRA, uh, really kind of strong, strong leaders who are unafraid to sort of demonstrate the importance of empathy and sort of think about, you know, how they interact with individuals and how they influence successfully rather than, you know, just kind of setting out a clear vision and then expecting everyone to march towards it, which I think is, is also really powerful.

So, yeah, no, no kind of one in particular, but lots of really great experiences I would say over time, which have, which I sort of think back to quite a bit and try to exemplify if I can.

Sam: It's clear that you've done a lot of reflection about the experiences that you've had and how you want to influence other people. So I'm placement manager, level four apprentice, at the Home Office, and it's my first time managing someone. And I find myself a lot of the time really thinking, okay, I do want my apprentice day to be as good as it can be. And I find myself doing what you are doing and thinking about experiences that I've had positive and negative. Yeah. Try and influence my own style.

But it's hard though, isn't it?

Bella: It's really hard and that's, that's never really got any easier for me. You know, cuz you've, you, you really, if you, if you care about the people that you are working with, then it, it never gets easier because you know, if anything, the sort of the, the things that you're dealing with, the challenges that you're dealing with get more complex.

And then when it's more than one person, when it's several people and you're trying to sort of balance the needs of all of them, it becomes, it becomes even harder. But I think that's quite important that it remains difficult, because if it's, if it's just easy, then there's, you know, there's probably something wrong.

You're not, you're probably not supporting them as much as you need to.

Sam: So, moving on a little bit mm-hmm. You've mentioned a couple of times, um, but you are a mother.

Bella: Yep.

Sam: Um, tell us a little bit about how that impacts on your work and how you can. I don't wanna ask that cliched question of how can you have it all? But of course, being a mother will present its challenges. How has that been for you in your professional life?

Bella: Uh, really hard and I'm, I'm sure it's, you know, it's the same for everybody with any kind of external responsibilities. Be they caring responsibilities, be they parenting, whatever. I think if you've got anything that competes with your professional life, particularly if it competes to the extent that, you know, motherhood does, for me it's really, really challenging.

And I guess I'm, I'm coming from the perspective of a person who back in the day before I had children, when I was sort of young and carefree, used to just, if I couldn't do something at work, I would compensate by spending more time on it. You know, I was really, really focused on delivering, really wanted to do well, um, and it, that was incredibly important to me and if I needed to flex the rest of my life around it to deliver, I would. Um, but that wasn't necessarily a, you know, a particularly healthy balance, particularly as, you know, if I, if I wasn't doing what I needed to, I would, you know, just allow the rest of my life to sort of fade back a little bit so that I could focus more on work.

Um, so I think the, the thing that motherhood has given me is, uh, an ability to ruthlessly prioritise. Um, because I, I can't just say, well, you know what, kids, you go and deal with yourselves for a while cause they're three and six and they still can't feed themselves and they still can't really put themselves to bed or get 'em to school or whatever. So they, they need me. They really, really need me. Um, so that sort of ability to prioritise and make sure that I am continuing to carve out time for non-work stuff is really, really critical. But also I think, um, they kind of give me perspective and that's something I didn't really have enough of I would say in my early career, if something was going wrong at work or I wasn't delivering as I should do, I felt it really, really deeply. And whilst I, you know, I still feel it, at the end of the day, I'll go home and, you know, the fact that my daughter can now swim a length is equally important as the fact that I've just royally messed up a really important speech or presentation or, you know, I've, I've not delivered what I, what I thought I should at work.

So that, that perspective is incredibly valuable. And I think, you know, finding something, whatever it is, whether it's motherhood or otherwise,

that's sort of not work and that gives you that perspective is, is really important. Um, it's probably a bit pitiful, but for me it kind of took having two kids and you know, kind of doing this really extreme thing to kind of get that level of perspective. But whatever it is, I think it's really important.

Sam: Okay, well, let's chat a little bit about cybersecurity as an industry more generally.

Bella: Mm-hmm.

Sam: So I'm gonna ask you to get out your crystal ball. What do you see, um, in the future for cybersecurity? How do you see the profession changing?

Bella: That's a really interesting question, and I, I guess there's, there's two things for me. So one is I think in an ideal world, cybersecurity, would we're kind of at a, a bit of a peak cyber moment right now, I think where, you know, we spent a long time getting people to care about cybersecurity as an issue, recognize the threats, um, you know, understand what they should be trying to do to improve it and when we're not quite there yet, but I think we're sort of getting there.

The ideal though would be that we don't have to keep having this conversation about cybersecurity specifically, and that actually it's just an integrated part of how we deliver technology and how we deliver things like digital transformation within governments. So I'm really keen that over time sort of seen less as this special niche set of people who do cybersecurity in a special bunker somewhere. And it's more just, you know, part of the digital and development and capabilities, um, and sort of skills that, that people need to deliver technology functions and capability. Um, so I think that's true from a, from a technology perspective and it's why we spend a lot of time within my team working really closely with the central digital and data office, also in Cabinet Office who're responsible for digital, um, and technology strategy. Because actually we should be working hand in glove and it, you know, it should be the case that cybersecurity is just a, a thread in the, the sort of the broader digital transformation. So I think, I think that's really important.

And I guess the other, the other point from my perspective is making it not something that is, you know, just the domain of a certain category of

person. You know, we've touched on diversity and inclusion previously. I think, you know, the technology profession across the UK, um, globally has always been kind of dominated by, you know, people of a certain background. And I think we're sort of starting to see a move away from. But I would really like to see a cyber profession, particularly in government, but also across the UK in relatively short order that looks fundamentally different. Um, and you know, where people see real opportunity no matter what kind of, uh, uh, sort of educational background they're coming from. So whether they're a, you know, person who's previously focused on humanities, um, or cares more about sort of technology or scientific disciplines, but can, can see a position for themselves in it, but also, you know, from, from a sort of cultural background or an ethnicity perspective or, or you know, any, any other sort of, um, characteristic that, that people see it as an opportunity and they don't kind of see any particular barrier to coming and working in cyber. I think that's really, you know, that that's where we should be. And you know, there, there's kind of two reasons for that. One is that at the moment we are very undiverse, which means that we're sort of not able to solve problems properly. We don't have appropriate diversity of thought, and so we'll keep coming up with the same solutions to the same problem rather than thinking in a more kind of rounded and holistic way.

But also we've got a massive skills gap. So we've got like a, a bunch of untapped communities that that don't currently choose to come and work in cybersecurity. Which is a massive problem because we've got a bunch of vacancies to fill and we need all those people to be wanting to come and work in cybersecurity.

So it's really, it's really, really important I think that we tackle that problem head on. And for me, the future of the cybersecurity profession is one where everybody feels like they have a place in it. Everybody feels like there's an opportunity for them to work in it as a, as a discipline, as an area of interest.

Sam: And if we've got listeners who are working in government already, but perhaps they're in an enabling function, so they might be, you know, a business analyst or an executive assistant.

Bella: Yeah.

Sam: What can people like that do, um, to try and break into cyber?

Bella: Uh, I would say lots of things. So, um, understand whether or not cybersecurity is, is an area of interest for you, because I think if, if you are interested in it, if you find it compelling, if you find it something that you know really floats your boat, then there will be a place for the skills that you have. But I think spending a bit of time reading around the subject and trying to understand whether or not it's for you is, is really important. Um, but I think then, uh, you know, doing things like getting in touch with the, the government security profession, there are some brilliant schemes available. So the uh, cyber fast stream scheme is a fabulous one. Um, there were apprenticeship schemes ongoing at the moment and we're gonna be doing a lot of work, um, in the next few months think about ways that we can bring in existing civil servants from other disciplines, but also people externally from the civil service to, to the profession.

So I would expect the opportunities to, to really be increasing, but also if you're sitting in a department at the moment and you're interested in cybersecurity, go and speak to your cybersecurity team because they will bite your arm off or, um, get in touch with me directly and I will, I will be very happy to have a conversation.

Sam: Oh, lovely. Your inbox is gonna be very full.

Bella: I really, I, hope so.

Sam: on the flip side almost mm-hmm. Thinking about people who are in cyber, but perhaps more junior grades, do you have any advice for them or women in particular actually to progress into leadership?

Bella: So I guess, um, I think engaging with the, the security profession is, is incredibly useful there are some really great schemes, um, that they're developing at the moment. So things like, um, future Secure leaders, uh, which is looking at taking people within the security profession at the moment and helping them to develop and, you know, getting them the right sort of mentoring and support. Um, I would say there's, you know, there's, there's kind of lots of opportunity but also I, think the problem we have in cyber is that the, the profession itself is still kind of forming. We're still figuring out what it looks like and what the roles are, and, you know, how we develop towards them so nobody's got the right answers. So I think don't be afraid of, you know, taking a chance on a different role or trying something slightly different because there isn't a perfect career path. Or if there is, I've, I've not managed to

figure out what it is. So be prepared to, you know, take quite a circuitous route and, and sort of find value along the way rather than waiting for the perfect next role.

Sam: That's some really good advice. Um, have you personally benefited from any sort of scheme like that or any mentors that you've had in your career that have really helped you along?

Bella: Uh, I've had some great mentors. So one of my mentors at the moment is an incredible person to speak to. So he's uh, been working in the government security profession for a long time and he is really, Uh, just, just has the level of pragmatism that you need sometimes. And so I, when I speak to him about the challenges that I'm dealing with in Cabinet Office, uh, you know, he sort of gives me the history of how this has happened 15 times before, and, you know, it's, perhaps it's not been solved yet, but it's, that's all okay. He's also, um, full of incredibly helpful advice, like, don't try and make everybody happy, don't try and please everybody, particularly in a, in a central role where you're trying to deliver across multiple different departments and it's really complex. You've, you've really gotta pick your battles and focus on where the most value is and where you can, where you can add the most value, which I think is, is very sage advice.

Um, I've done quite a few, uh, sort of leadership programs in the past, so I did want BAE Systems, which was incredibly helpful. Um, and I'm doing one at the moment actually with the Ministry of Defence. Which is about identifying, um, kind of leaders across defence and the broader public sector and bringing them together. Um, and by far the biggest, uh, or the most valuable thing I've found in all of those other sort of schemes and leadership schemes that I've done is the, is the networks that you build.

Um, I'm an introvert and so I, I find it hard to kind of build those connections on a, on a general basis, but those kinds of schemes are incredibly powerful. You inherently build relationships and it's, it's, it's really easy then to go back to them and say, 'Hey, I've got a problem. It's, it's in your space, can you, can you help me?' And even if, you know, you just keep those contacts in your back pocket for a year and then, you know, all of a sudden one comes out and. You know, they, they reach out to you. It's, it's still a really powerful thing.

Sam: Yeah. I think that structured networking experiences can be quite good.

Bella: Yeah.

Sam: Because everybody is all there for the same reason.

Bella: Yeah.

Sam: So things like our conferences, if they've got a bit before or after Yeah. Or at lunchtime and things. I actually went to a women in tech networking conference set up by Home Office. Women in DDaT. Oh. And which was really good. And someone that actually gave us some networking advice. Yeah. Which I'd never heard before. Uhhuh. And she was telling us about the best ways to approach people. Mm-hmm. And she was saying that if there are two people who are very, very close together Yeah. She'd probably leave them be

Bella: Yeah.

Sam: Because they're having quite a Yeah, yeah. You know, an an in-depth conversation if they seem to be stood quite far apart mm-hmm with quite open body language you can slot in and make a nice triangle. Um, and she also said that people on that own are always good to talk to. Yeah. Um, because it's also very easy for them to say, oh, you know, I'm waiting for someone, or, and when it's just one-on-one, it can often be a lot easier. Yeah.

Um, it is actually nice though, um, that we are becoming a bit more social in person, um, again, and making those connections. So imposter syndrome is the big buzzword almost at the moment. Yeah. It's something that we hear quite a lot about. Mm-hmm. Would you be able to tell us about your own personal experience of imposter syndrome, if any?

Bella: Yes. Uh, so I guess the first thing to say is that I definitely feel this on a daily basis. Um, but I also, I'm not sure I've ever spoken to anyone who doesn't. So the, the thing for me is that it's, it's definitely, I think, seen as, Uh, a syndrome or a thing that particularly affects women, and perhaps it does, and I've, I've not seen the sort of the data to support it or otherwise, but I sort of feel like you'd be hard pressed to find somebody, particularly in a, you know, somebody in an interesting role of somebody in leadership or somebody who's doing something exciting where they don't feel a sense of imposter syndrome, and that's, In, in a way it's negative because, um, you know, you don't want to feel like an

imposter. You don't want to feel like you're, you know, you shouldn't, you shouldn't be doing a particular role. But there are kind of aspects of it that I think are kind of healthy or kind of good in that I think humility is a really, really important part of, certainly, of leadership. Um, and of, you know, doing a role that has an influence on, for example, public services or, you know, doing things for, for civil service or for public service. So I think that kind of little, little aspect of imposter syndrome is actually quite a positive thing. So the, you know, being humble about what you're doing and recognizing that you won't have all the answers, that you're not, you know, the sort of the be all and end all. That there are other people that you need to work with to, to support you.

Um, but I guess that's a, a kind of a tiny portion of, of the, sort of the broader challenge and, um, you know, imposter syndrome in general I do think it's just a, it's a product of, of doing interesting roles or doing roles where you can't be expected to know absolutely everything all the time. You'll always have pockets where you feel like actually you are not adequately, you're not equipped to do the role, you're not equipped to answer the question. Um, but I think the, the fact a lot of people feel it should be more broadly recognized, and I think it should be something that we all just talk about because I, I suspect that we're all kind of feeling it on a daily basis really.

Sam: Definitely. Definitely. I think obviously cyber technology advances so quickly. Yeah. Things are always changing. You will never. Know everything that there is to know. Um, how do you manage that? In fact, what do you do to try and keep abreast of all the things that you need to know in cyber?

Bella: I mean, short answer is I don't. There'll always be, you know, some new attack that's occurred particularly externally and I don't have the detail of it to my fingertips, and I should do, you know, that that's, that's sort of a really important part of my role.

Um, but I think recognizing that I'm not gonna know everything is, is kind of the first step. Um, I read a lot. I listen a lot. I listen to my colleagues in particular. You know, there's, there's, there's too much information for me to know, um, or for me to sort of try and keep a handle on but I absolutely trust that the people I work with, um, will have, you know, sort of spent some time looking at their particular area and will know what the kind of the critical things are that I need to focus on.

So I think there's a lot about kind of putting trust in the people you work with and knowing that they. They'll flag up the critical points. They'll make sure that you are kind of abreast of those really important things. And then just, you know, being unafraid to spend a lot of time learning and a lot of time kind of asking, asking questions.

Sam: Well, Bella, I could talk to you for hours, um, but I think we're gonna close off now. Cool. So thank you so much for your time and for sharing your wisdom with us and with our listeners. Could you leave our listeners with a recommendation to go away with? So it can be a book, a podcast, a TV show, anything cyber related or not.

Bella: Oh, that's interesting. Um, so I, I'll definitely have to do cyber related because my non-cyber related, uh, TV shows and books are pretty trashy. Um, so. I'm, I'm gonna go with, so I, I've listened to a couple of podcasts on a regular basis, which I think are really great and I listened to them whilst I'm running. So I feel like somehow the sort of, the information goes in a little bit better. Um, cause I can't be distracted by other stuff. So one is, uh, Risky Business or Risky Biz. So this is, it's an Australian cyber podcast and it's basically like a news digest. And then they do, um, they have sponsor interviews with tech firms, uh, and they sort of have some sort of in-depth sort of views of technology stuff.

And I, I love it, um, but it's also a really good way of kind of understanding what the, you know, what the latest position is.

And I, I dunno, something about the Australian accent, I just found particularly soothing. So it's really nice to hear about cyber news in an Australian accent.

[Outro music.]

Thank you for listening to Off Mute, with a special thanks to today's guest, Bella. This episode was hosted by Sam, produced by Sophie, and written by Isabella.

[Outro music.]