Transcript of an interview published on Westpac Wire between Westpac Wire's deputy editor Emma Foster and Westpac's Janelle Howe.

Introduction: This is "Tech in 10" by Westpac Wire, a 10-minute chat with industry experts about Westpac's latest tech news and trends.

Emma Foster: A new high tech command centre has just opened in Westpac's Sydney headquarters, which aims to improve the way the bank looks after its vast network of technology systems. And joining me, Emma Foster, for a chat is command centre leader, Janelle Howe. Janelle, welcome to "Tech in 10".

Janelle Howe: Thank you, Emma.

Emma: Now, Janelle, when I first heard about the command centre, the image that popped into my mind was NASA's mission control. So first up, can you actually describe what Westpac's new command centre is like and explain a bit about what happens there?

Janelle: Sure I can. NASA's command control is quite cool, but we'll stick with that. Thank you. And our command centre actually looks like NASA command control. It has 22 metres of dashboard rotating around our applications and infrastructure. So it is quite the impressive feast for the eyes when you walk in. So Westpac's ICC tracks and monitors the status of Westpac's technology, ensuring that we deliver quality services for our customer. Historically, our teams were located around skill sets. So teams with similar skills were located together. The new facility enables us to bring together teams that look at incident response and representatives from our application teams, infrastructure teams and security teams. The unique ability to have these functions physically located allows them to have a shared view of potential incidents and find correlations.

Emma: So what kind of things are being monitored at the centre?

Janelle: So collectively, our teams monitor our 32 infrastructure layers across infrastructure towers such as database, middleware, network, compute, storage, workplace, in addition to over 800 applications that provide core services to our customers and staff.

Emma: So at any one time up on those 22 meters of dashboard, you're basically seeing everything that's happening across the technology network at the bank.

Janelle: Correct.

Emma: And so as soon as something starts to go wrong, what will happen?

Janelle: Red lights will flash black. It's your typical red-light dashboard. So usually we see red lights happening in multiple spaces and we can correlate across that stack. So across that end-to-end service, we can correlate between the application and the infrastructure to see where that breakpoint might be.

Emma: Right. So in effect, it's going to be helping to speed up that process of locating where the problem might be to help find the solution.

Janelle: Correct.

Emma: All right. And so from a customer perspective, will I notice anything different? Will there be a tangible, different or benefit from a customer perspective?

Janelle: Absolutely. The service management journey that we've been on, it's about customer experience. And we want to ensure that we provide a great customer experience every time. And that means, first and foremost, ensuring our services perform as expected. Our end-to-end collaborative approach to service is about resolving incidents fast and proactively discussing lead indicators to prevent them before impact.

Emma: And when we're talking about incidents there, what are you referring to?

Janelle: So an incident is anything that impacts a service. So it could be a slowdown. It could be an outage where the service is unavailable for the customer, full stop, or it could be a particular function within a service is unavailable. In the past 12 months, we've reduced our incidents by 70 percent and our impact to customer by 20 percent.

Emma: Okay. And as a result of bringing the teams together into the centre, have you noticed a change in the speed of being able to address these types of incidents?

Janelle: We have. We've noticed the teams are responding faster. So we're on the ground. There is no delay whilst we try and locate people. And because we have that ability to correlate across the service, we've noticed faster responses and faster resolution. And that's solely why we're on this journey.

Emma: How long did it take to get to this point?

Janelle: It took us 18 months to get to this point. And that's not just 18 months of building a facility. It's 18 months of building all of the underlying technology and the underlying processes and capability that are required to run a facility like this.

Emma: So how many people would you have in the command centre monitoring all those applications?

Janelle: So our command centre in Sydney is capable of housing 92 team members from across tech.

Emma: And from a dollar perspective, what has been the kind of level of investment to build the new command centre, and also, do you have any projections around its likely productivity savings?

Janelle: Yeah. So the command centre is part of our strategy to build a simpler, stronger bank, and simplified IT processes will drive savings in team members' time undoubtedly. That time though will be redirected to building new functionality or improved functionality for our customers. So I guess the bottom line about this is it's more of a simplification in the name of customer than it is in the name of productivity, although productivity savings will be driven

Emma: And some people may be curious about the rationale behind building a physical command centre rather than a virtual command centre, given that, you know, throughout COVID so many companies did move their workflows into remote or virtual models. How are you thinking about that?

Janelle: Great question. So during COVID, undoubtedly these teams were able to collaborate virtually - we had to. However, the unique difference that the command centre brings is that having the teams together physically means that they have a shared view of potential incidents. And we've already seen them finding correlations between our applications and our infrastructure in real time that they cannot discover when they're working virtually - just the sheer scale of what we have to monitor can't be looked at on a single screen at home. And it's something we've never been able to do before. So this is kind of the unique value-add, I guess, of having that giant dashboard screen and people together looking at giant dashboard screen.

Emma: In terms of the next steps for the command centre, I've heard you talk about moving from a reactive model to a more predictive model. Can you explain this a little bit more and also any other plans that you have in the pipeline?

Janelle: Sure. Happy to. So the first phase of our transformation saw us focus on building foundational capabilities, if you like, in our people, our process and our technology. So we simplified our partnership model, we injected best practice, we incorporated service risk management, and we built our world class facility, the Integrated Command Centre – or ICC. The journey continues for us with maturing the capabilities that we implemented in Phase 1 and strengthening our proactive and predictive capability. We like to say that in Phase 1, the "I" in ICC bought the teams and the dashboard together in an Integrated model. Now, as we move into Phase 2, we like to say the "I" will be transformed to Intelligent command centre, and that is building out predictive and preventative capabilities through machine learning and artificial intelligence. So that artificial intelligence will be able to predict outages, and also we intend on building technology with self-healing capability. So the artificial intelligence journey that we're embarking on now for the command centre will see us do things like we will ingest all of the information we have on past incidents and allow us to learn through that information so that we can predict when future incidents are going to happen and let the team know ahead of time. So our first target will be around incidents.

Emma: Right. Okay, so it sounds like there is quite a lot more to come.

Janelle: Indeed. There is.

Emma: Janelle, thanks very much for your time today, it's been great speaking to you.

Janelle: Thank you. It's been great speaking to you,

Emma: And everyone else listening. Thank you for joining him. For more bite sized tech updates from Westpac, feel free to subscribe to Westpac Wire's podcasts. Until next time, bye for now.