

COVID-19 RESPONSE INQUIRY

SUBMISSION BY:

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Submission to the Inquiry into the response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The COVIDSafe App was developed in early 2020 and subsequently heavily promoted by the Australian Government with the primary purpose being to assist contact tracing efforts. Technical limitations of Apple's iOS and Google's Android operating systems were identified early on as limiting the effectiveness of the app. In late May 2020 Apple and Google jointly announced the initial release of the Exposure Notification Framework (ENF) to address the primary issues compromising the performance of this and similar apps being developed across the worldⁱ.

In mid-June 2020 Boston Consulting Group (BCG) provided advice to the Australian Government regarding the ENF and recommendedⁱⁱ that *"there is a strong prima-facie case for it"* based on its assessment that even if *"about half of Current users of COVIDSafe were to switch to an ENF based app, we would expect 2x to 4x more 'true close contacts' to be identified"*.

Notwithstanding similar private and public advice from many other parties to adopt the ENF, the Government chose instead to pursue an alternative, locally developed, solution known as "Herald". This solution proved largely ineffective, and to the best of my knowledge, no other nation adopted this "novel" technology.

The primary purpose of this brief submission is to contrast this decision with that of many other nations in 2020ⁱⁱⁱ, to understand how it was made and ensure that in the future we avoid making decisions that ignore the advice of competent technical experts.

In 1997, Former President of the Soviet Union, Mikhail S. Gorbachev said, *"Political leaders need scientific support...The price of mistakes in political decision-making is very high."* Over many decades of experience in global technology, I have found this advice to be true.

In the case of the CovidSafe App, technical advice appeared to have been ignored or over-ruled at the political level, a reckless catastrophe during a global pandemic. Such high-handed political over-reach it would seem, bore no regard to the nature and scale of risk. This is the same culture, practice, and disregard for risk to life that was witnessed during RoboDebt, and continues with RoboNDIS created at the same time as RoboDebt.

This period of RoboDebt, RoboNDIS and the CovidSafe App catastrophes, bear lessons that cannot and must not be ignored.

Based on evidence and the experience in the UK, the Australian Government's decision to not adopt the ENF, may have resulted in the suffering and/or death of many more Australian Citizens than otherwise would have occurred.

The UK's first attempt at a COVID App was piloted in early 2020. It failed miserably and was abandoned. In contrast to the Australian Government however, in late September 2020 they launched a new version which (for the first time) included the Apple/Google ENF APIs^{iv}. In May 2021, *Nature* published the findings of a research effort undertaken by researchers from Oxford University and the Turing Institute^v. The key findings of this research note are, that over the three-month period from October to December 2020, the updated app was used by 16.5 million users and that the use of the app reduced the number of infections by between 284,000 and 594,000 cases. By any measure that's a lot of people that didn't become infected, get sick or subsequently die.

While it is the case that the UK went on to face a far larger problem with COVID, and with the user experience of its App, this research nevertheless appears to have confirmed the advice given to the Australian Government and demonstrated that it was the decision to adopt the Google/Apple ENF that made the difference between an app that worked effectively to support contact tracing and one that didn't.

The Final Report of the Senate Select Committee on Covid 19 (April 2022)^{vi}, touched briefly on the failure of the COVIDSafe app to deliver on its early promises. It did not however consider the consequences of the Government's decision to ignore the use of the ENF.

Recommendation: That the Review/Committee:

1. Investigate the reasons for not adopting the ENF.
2. Examine any political interference in the use of the ENF standard.
3. Determine what risk assessment (including risk to life) was undertaken in the development of the CovidSafe App, with the intentional decision not to adopt the globally accepted protocol.

4. Recommend to government that the “CovidSafe App ENF Decision”, be developed as a case study of equal bearing and weight as the RoboDebt case study, for study and examination by the Australian Public Sector.

Marie Johnson

Marie Johnson is the CEO of the Centre for Digital Business, a digital services and AI company.

Marie is an eminent global award-winning digital authority; advocate for the humanitarian application of AI; and a relentless inclusion and accessibility advocate. Marie was awarded the prestigious US Government O-Visa for Individuals with Extraordinary Ability or Achievement.

She is an international speaker, author, and commentator on artificial intelligence, human rights, technology, ehealth, cyber, identity, ethics, and innovation.

Marie's expertise is the human experience in complex servicing systems.

At the forefront of digital transformation for decades, Marie's inimitable track record across the public and private sector in Australia and internationally, covers health and human services; disability services; global ehealth immigration and visa systems; tax; identity; and payments.

The expanse of roles includes large scale service delivery operations; global technology; advisor to governments globally; Chief Information Officer; Chief Technology Architect; Technology Authority; intelligence analyst; board director; and STEM patron.

Throughout her career, Marie's extraordinary expertise has been sought by world leaders and global organisations on the geo-political and democratic dynamics of national technology.

Her distinguished experience encompasses leading Microsoft's Worldwide Public Services and eGovernment industry based in Seattle. In taking up this role, the US Government awarded Marie the O-1 Visa with Microsoft noting Marie's egovernment knowledge '*...is unique in the world and is of particular interest to Microsoft as we pursue our egovernment strategies*'.

For many years, Marie was the Chief Technology Architect for the Australian Department of Human Services, with responsibilities including the architecture and technology business cases bringing together the massive systems of Centrelink, Medicare Australia, and the Child Support Agency. Marie was responsible for initiating Payment Delivery Reform, as part of Service Delivery Reform. Previously, Marie was the Chief Technology Architect for the Australian Health and Human Services Access Card.

In a major service delivery transformation role at the Department of Immigration and Citizenship, Marie created and delivered the Visa Pricing Transformation, which generated interest globally from friendly counterpart Immigration agencies. For the first time, this involved the application of differential pricing to visas, channels, visa products in conjunction with an innovative digital business model, electronic payments strategy and legislative change, projecting additional revenue to the Federal Budget of \$700Million. Responsibilities also encompassed the delivery of the global eMedical system (a digital operating model for managing risk-based health assessments) to over one hundred countries, in partnership with Citizenship and Immigration Canada.

Marie was Head of the Technology Authority for the Australian National Disability Insurance Agency and responsible for the technology business case, the implementation of co-design, a programme of innovation and the creation of Nadia.

Various board and advisory roles include Independent Member of the Australian Federal Police Spectrum Program Board; member of the New South Wales Government Digital Government Advisory Board; invited member of the Accenture Global CIO Council; National Director of the Australian Information Industry Association; Faculty at Exponential Medicine Singularity University; and an Inaugural Member of The Australian National University Cyber Institute Advisory Board.

Over many years, Marie has been a judge on Australian and international technology and innovation awards.

Marie is a writer and regular contributor to a variety of media publications, including InnovationAus and CIO Australia. She has authored chapters for books, and authored and co-authored international papers. Marie was one of forty Australian innovation leaders and foremost thinkers invited to write a paper on the future of Australian jobs and industry, in the first publication of The Innovation Papers.

Marie is an in-demand international keynote speaker and sought-after participant on podcasts and webinars. She has spoken at Singularity University Exponential Medicine; Medica, the world's largest medical and health trade fair; O'Reilly AI; and in 2020, delivered the Kenneth Jenkins Oration.

The innovation and digital initiatives Marie has led have been recognised globally.

These include the United Nations Public Service Award in the category ‘Application of ICT in government: e-government’ for Business Entry Point (www.business.gov.au) which she led for 5 years prior.

Marie was recognised as the 2006-2007 ‘Innovative CIO of the Year – Australia’; named one of Australia’s ‘100 Women of Influence’ in 2013; and awarded the ‘Exceptional Woman of Excellence’ at the 2019 Women Economic Forum.

In 2022, Marie received the Australian Capital Territory Mental Health Carer Award.

Marie has an MBA from the Melbourne Business School (specialising in innovation, technology, and ecommerce); Bachelor of Arts Deakin University (international relations, defence, and strategic studies); Graduate of the Harvard University Kennedy School of Government Senior Executive Fellows Program; and Graduate of Australian Institute of Company Directors.

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<sup>i</sup> <https://covid19.apple.com/contacttracing> and <https://www.google.com/covid19/exposurenotifications/>

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.health.gov.au/sites/default/files/2023-11/foi-4810-released-documents-covidsafe-app-abt-report.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.xda-developers.com/google-apple-covid-19-contact-tracing-exposure-notifications-api-app-list-countries/>

<sup>iv</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/18/uk-poised-to-abandon-coronavirus-app-in-favour-of-apple-and-google-models>

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41586-021-03606-z>

<sup>vi</sup> [https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/024920/toc\\_pdf/Finalreport.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf](https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/024920/toc_pdf/Finalreport.pdf;fileType=application%2Fpdf)