

UK IT INDUSTRY AWARDS

2020 Commemorative Magazine

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UK IT INDUSTRY AWARDS

Personal Excellence awards:
IT Service and Support
Professional of the Year

Winner: Cheryl Hartley, HMRC

What does it mean to you to win this award?

Winning this award is a real highlight for me. It's great to receive recognition from right across the IT industry for all the great achievements my team and the wider HMRC IT team have delivered.

I recognise this is a personal achievement award and I'm hugely humbled for that personal recognition as I put my heart and soul into everything I do and I see that the panel has acknowledged that. But I do also feel this is a team achievement because this award isn't given to leaders of teams that haven't delivered significant improvements.

Talk us through your career

I joined the civil service over 20 years ago, at the lowest grade, and have worked my way up the progression ladder. In doing so, I've held many different roles, grades and professions.

It's always been the scope and the interest of each role that has attracted me, rather than the profession or workstream. I moved into IT six years ago now when I joined HMRC, into a Lead Major Incident Management role which required the same core skills I already had. I knew it was going to be a huge

learning curve, joining a new organisation with a limited IT background and no established network.

But, never one to be phased by a challenge, I set about proving myself and building a reputation for delivering while undertaking on-the-job learning and formal education. Within 12 months I was heading up the wider Major Incident Management team, progressing to Head of Service Management 12 months later, before becoming the Deputy Director for Service Management and Operations in 2019.

What does a typical working day involve?

A typical day for me is massively varied and no day is ever the same. Working in HMRC we have such a spread of responsibility that on any given day I can be moving from meeting to meeting, switching between topics such as ITSM transformation, EU transition, COVID-19, self-assessment, talent development, and mentoring.

Working in live service does mean I could have my day all planned and then a major incident hits wiping all plans aside, while we get into resolving the issue and all the briefings that come with it. Who wants a job that's boring and predictable eh?



What does HMRC do?

We are the UK's tax and customs authority. We're here to collect the money that pays for the UK's public services and give financial support to people.

This year our role has been vital in delivering the support needed to the country during the COVID pandemic with new schemes like the Job Retention scheme, Self-Employed scheme, Eat Out to Help Out and more. And we have also been pivotal in delivering a successful EU transition.

What advice would you give to someone considering a career in IT?

Don't be put off by the view that you have to be a coder or engineer. Look at the strengths and skills you have, and in which IT roles you'd utilise those strengths every day. Technical skills can be learned and enhanced, but your core strengths are what make you who you are.

Who has been the biggest influence in your career?

There have been three line managers in particular who have influenced my career – the first being a manager who always believed in me, more than I did myself, and supported me to take roles that developed my people management skills.

The second was a senior leader who always saw me as a problem-solver and gave me challenges that were not strictly in my role but gave me a greater understanding of the organisation I worked in, and pushed me to always take the harder career choices.

Finally, a leader who has really shaped me as an IT professional, who has taught me so much about this field and given me so much support: allowing me to shape my organisation as I want; giving me access to the wider HMRC to widen my network of influence; while being there when I have needed a sanity check, a bit of guidance or backing to stand my ground.

Who do you admire and why?

My go-to person, who I have admired since a teenager, is Martin Luther King. I think it was his determination to do the right thing, to make a difference for others and keep going despite the set-backs.

I think it's important to acknowledge that, while he was a great leader, he definitely had flaws as a man and this is the same for most people in leadership; we are all human, we make mistakes and we have vulnerabilities like everyone else.

He would be the person at the top of my list if I could have a dinner party and invite someone from the past.

What are your aspirations; how would you like to progress?

Many people think I am ambitious, but not my view. I would say instead that I am driven.

My aim has never been promotion but it has always been to be the best I can be and in doing so that has gotten me noticed and promoted – for me I think there is a difference. My aspiration is always to be comfortable in myself knowing that I am doing my very best, and that people can see that in me.

I really enjoy working in IT and I think it suits my natural strengths so progression for me in the coming years would be to build on my previous roles and professions, such as project/programme management for example, and maybe to move into that area at a senior level but still within the IT arena.

I have a lot of years left of my working life and I love a challenge and to learn and make a difference – so expanding into another area of IT would keep me happy and interested.

What are you happiest doing when you're not working?

Socialising with friends and family. I love my holidays, relaxing, socialising and having new experiences. I love spending time with my extended family, and I have a fantastic group of friends that we have great times with. I work hard but play hard and outside of lockdown I am usually out every weekend, be it with friends, family, or at a football match as that is my other love.

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Project Excellence awards: AI/ML Project of the Year

Runner-up: Luke Hackshaw, Thames Water

What does it mean to you to win this award?

As a product owner, it's my role to maximise the value of our app. I also see it as intrinsically linked to making the development team's work meaningful, by helping them see what a difference they make.

Working at a water utility, I am aware that technological innovation is not what the industry has been commonly cited for. Winning this award for my team has helped us to be seen and valued by the wider tech industry and appreciated to a greater degree, which I hope puts a wider smile on my team's face.

As well, I'm proud to have signalled that Thames Water explores all avenues to serve our customers better – and we excel when we do. If that can inspire more water utilities to innovate in this way, then we've generated public value beyond what we would have originally dreamed! I find that inspiring.

Talk us through your career

I first joined Thames Water in 2011 as a temporary staff hire, then moving into a management position for our Planning department. After this I worked a few years in Leakage Management ensuring that

Thames Water could reduce the volume of leakage on its network. I would also return a few years later as a manager of this function, helping to increase our work output and efficiency in leak detection.

It was in my first few years at Thames Water, I grew a hunger to improve the way we worked, which led me to become a project manager in the Transformation team. There I worked on an exciting project to reduce supply interruptions on Thames Water's network and was able to save over 100,000 customers from interruption, helping to avoid significant regulatory penalty. I successfully pitched and secured funding to work with an external company redesigning a patented medical technology for use in the water industry and while it was not immediately successful, I learnt a lot about the culture and environment required to successfully nurture innovation. My four years of project management were largely waterfall based, and I developed an itch to work in a more responsive way to our customers, discovering the agile way of working.



It was actually this desire to pursue agile – and my realisation that most change I administered was largely dependent upon integrated IT – that led me to become a product owner, when agile and product ownership was still a relatively new concept to Thames. I was instantly hooked to this way of working and really excited by the many ways we could apply data science to our problems. We set some big goals to aim for, after which a lot of time is spent speaking to experts, incorporating ideas into our AI, experimenting, and testing with our users. I also used my experience to help stitch together various products that were starting up in the Smart Water space, helping to leverage each other's strengths. It's been a great ride, and fantastic to be recognised with two awards in the industry for our work!

What does a typical working day involve?

First thing on the menu is a latte from my home barista machine, one of the many perks of working from home! As I work in an agile set up, usually the first meeting I have each day is a stand up, and this really is an effective way for me to stay connected to the development.

If I'm in a planning week, it can be all about prepping for the sprint ceremonies and ensuring I've sufficiently outlined the work I intend to hand to the development team.

Outside of a planning week, it's about reviewing some of the complex data science work the team produces, and other features that require feedback to ensure it meets the outlined problem. To keep our team honest, I often need to review our development with our users. I'm also working with departmental heads to

ensure we've got the right change support and culture in place to adopt the new technology, and that they champion the change.

Then it's for me to stay connected to other key stakeholders, building workshops, or engaging directly to ensure that the roadmap I'm putting into place is relevant and serves the business needs. While the rest is about being curious and following up technical suggestions to understand how we can do things differently.

What does Thames Water do?

As the UK's largest water and wastewater utility, Thames Water serves 15 million customers, delivering water to our customers, and then safely taking it away – so that they, the communities and environment we sit within can thrive.

Career highlight to date:

It has to be successfully delivering this amazing app into Thames Water's operation last year, which leverages innovative artificial intelligence straight into the hands of technicians – giving them powerful insight on where to find water leaks on our network. For decades before this, they'd been using paper maps, lists of historical leak info and working with their best judgement.

We had to overcome a significant cultural shift in how this insight was used. We dealt with three different organisations, understanding their change needs and adapting to ensure it was adopted, after which we empowered management with field performance insight from the app. This was instrumental in driving the right behaviours that maximised the AI insight being provided.

To see this technology translate into real business benefit, with more leaks being found and in less time – all with the users expressing their delight – is really a feat I'm still absorbing!

What advice would you give to someone considering a career in IT and AI?

You don't have to be a developer or similar, to be successful in this environment.

I found that curiosity in technology and a humble and willing approach to learning, while thinking how you can translate a complex idea into a practical business solution, will really help you leverage AI into a broad range of applications.

If you can make AI relatable to the average person, often they'll be the ones to generate all the ideas on how to apply it. In this way, you've helped bring horizontal thinking to what can often be a vertically-driven environment.

Who has been the biggest influence in your career?

I guess this is where I turn on the cliché but it's true – my parents have been the biggest influence on my career. They have allowed me to think freely, nurtured my curiosity, and supported me through my early career changes; in fact, every decision seemed to come with their full support behind me. They may not have always known what the right answer was, but they made me feel confident that I would find it, and it's that confidence that's stayed with me, and allowed me to weather the more difficult times in my career. I see myself as an extension of them, so I hope I can carry on that legacy!

Who do you admire and why?

I suppose I admire those whom I can learn from, and this tends to change as I change. Also as I'm always looking to expand my horizons, you can't stay on one person for too long!

Currently, I'm pretty impressed with Teresa Torres, a well-known product discovery coach, and how she translates complex ideas into really simple answers, while captivating the audience. Finding the simplest answer is good for educating, and in AI product development if you can cut through the complexity and help someone understand how or why they should be supporting you – or using your app – then you've got a secret sauce.

What are your aspirations; how would you like to progress?

I've really excited about product management so I'm keen to develop in that space, moving away from the daily beat into a more strategic position, aligning multiple products and products managers, creating a larger vision for a suite of products or a company, and proposing new products which leverage AI into untapped markets. Maybe even a Chief Product Officer in the not too distant future!

What are you happiest doing when you're not working

I enjoy getting out on the bike or hiking in the countryside. There's really no better way to spend your time when the lockdown rules allow it!

Outside of getting in my exercise, I like learning about new things whether that's through reading new books or taking some sort of course. Right now I'm doing a writing course with City Lit. When we're allowed to mix again, a simple day with a few friends over a drink is pretty satisfying too.

Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?

It's hard to not talk about the lockdown and its impact on mental health. I have been lucky to weather it with only the occasional day where I've felt a bit restless or bummed.

For anyone who's struggling, there's help out there such as the Samaritans helpline and Mind Urgent help online. There's also your colleagues, friends and family – one of the more uplifting things about this lockdown is how aware we've all become of mental health, making people more caring and willing to help out. So, reach out!

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Personal Excellence awards: IT Apprentice of the Year

Winner: Tom Smith, IBM

What does it mean to you to win this award?

I truly feel honoured to receive this award and this recognition. I think it goes to show that hard work and focus really do pay off.

I also think winning this award reflects just how supportive and compassionate the mentors, coaches and teams are that I have worked with – both in IBM and the clients I've worked with. These people consistently support and share their experiences and expertise, not just with me but with many other apprentices and young professionals too.

Talk us through your career

I left school at 16 and had a great opportunity to join Mercedes-Benz of Winchester and complete a level 2 and 3 Light Vehicle Maintenance and Diagnostics apprenticeship.

After fully qualifying, I wanted to challenge myself further. I'd invested a lot of time in understanding the vehicles' systems and developed a real interest in the technology in modern vehicles, so I decided to look for a role in the development of software and systems.

I half-heartedly applied to IBM in 2017 while I was working at Mercedes-Benz and didn't make it past the online assessment. That's when I pushed and

challenged myself to get into IBM by the following year. I went through the application process all over again and this time I was successful, joining IBM in 2018 on their software test pathway.

My journey at IBM so far has been super exciting. I've had a range of testing experience, carrying out a little functional testing and a lot of non-functional testing. I've mainly been focused on performance testing and working as a performance test engineer, ensuring clients' systems can handle hundreds of thousands of transactions a day, while remaining fast and faultless. This has included working with the world's largest building society, working on key strategic projects and some critical systems to enhance the company's capabilities.

What does IBM do?

IBM is the global leader in hybrid cloud and AI, serving clients in more than 170 countries. More than 2,800 clients use our hybrid cloud platform to accelerate their digital transformation journeys and, in total, more than 30,000 of them have turned to IBM to unlock value from their data. Guided by principles of trust, transparency and support for a more inclusive society, IBM also is committed to being a responsible steward of technology and a force for good in the world. For more information, visit: www.ibm.com.



What does a typical working day involve?

My day starts off with a stand-up, where each person in the team discusses what they did yesterday, what they will do today and if there's anything blocking them. I'll then have another call with a small group of my team to discuss exactly what our objectives are and how we're going to achieve them.

Next, I configure the environment so it's ready for our testing and I'll kick off the performance testing, monitoring the resource utilisation, analysing the results, writing up reports and then presenting them to stakeholders.

I find the most interesting part of my job is identifying problems and analysing logs and graphs to identify where and why the problem has occurred.

Career highlight to date:

My favourite part of my journey at IBM so far has been working with schools as part of the P-Tech programme – mentoring and teaching children and sharing insights into what it's like to work for IBM.

I've also enjoyed having amazing opportunities to present to some senior 'IBMers' about the work and the projects I've been involved in.

What advice would you give to someone considering a career in test engineering?

I think a more general bit of advice would be to have multiple mentors and coaches. I've found having mentors from different levels with a wide variety

of experiences and expertise can really help when learning new skills – whether it be a technical or soft skills – and when looking to grow your career.

Who has been the biggest influence in your career?

Well there are quite a few people to be honest – I don't think I could just select one!

Certainly, my people manager who believed in me and has given me some excellent advice and support throughout my apprenticeship. Also the technical managers I've had, Joe and Chris, who have helped coach and teach me the technical skills required to be a performance tester.

But I think most of all, my biggest influence has probably been my Dad. He also works at IBM and without knowing it, he's probably influenced me the most by sharing his expertise and experience, giving me the confidence to push myself, and introducing me to the world of IT.

Who do you admire and why?

Quite a few people once again but if I had to choose one, then it would be one of the performance architects who worked for a client whose account I was on in the first two years of my apprenticeship.

He was not only dedicated to achieving his goals and the success of the project team he ran, but he dedicated a lot of time to helping me achieve my goals and ensuring I got the best experience while on the project. He ensured I had a range of different experiences in testing and if I wanted to try something out, he would push me to do so.

What are your aspirations; how would you like to progress?

One of my more long-term goals is to work towards the senior levels of IBM, perhaps leading a practice within IBM with more responsibility and ensuring IBM moves forward and grows.

In the shorter term, I'd like to achieve some certifications in cloud technology and solutioning, particularly, RedHat and Amazon Web-Services.

Another aspiration of mine is to travel the world with my work. I've always wanted to spend a few years in Australia and if I can bring my work with me (especially performance testing which is what I love doing) then that would be an amazing experience and opportunity.

I'm also a huge fan of cars and the technology in vehicles and would like to be able to use my earlier career as a mechanic at Mercedes-Benz – somehow link it with my current role in performance testing.

What are you happiest doing when you're not working

Watching football. I'm a huge Burnley fan and love watching all football as well as other sports like rugby and F1. I also enjoy the social side to it, meeting with a group of friends and watching the games – obviously it's a little different now with COVID but I'm sure we will get back to it once this blows over.

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