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## The importance of public trust in an information age

- This was a key topic for my office during this year’s Privacy Awareness Week. We held a panel discussion on this theme and learnt the crucial role that public trust plays in the success of government initiatives such as QR check in systems implemented to manage public health crisis. We also learnt what steps organisations can take to build public trust, and the importance of organisations being transparent and accountable.
- Information powers today’s digital economy. It drives innovation, contributing to the emergence of technologies such as artificial intelligence and the Internet of Things. It is used to solve public policy issues, improve service delivery, and deliver better outcomes for public and private sector organisations and for individuals.
- The digital economy has not only transformed the ways in which information is collected, used, and disclosed, it has led to a significant increase in the volume of personal information collected from the public.
- In many circumstances, individuals do not have genuine choice regarding the collection and use of their information. For instance, individuals often have to provide their personal information to government organisations to access a range of services.
- It is therefore crucial that organisations handle personal information responsibly, in a way that respects and protects individuals’ rights, and meets the public’s expectations. This helps to build and maintain public trust in the organisations’ information handling practices. Public trust also helps an organisation gain the social licence needed to use personal information.
- Responsible information handling practices include:

- Collecting only the minimum amount of information required for a specific project or initiative
  - Being open with individuals about the purposes for which their information is being collected, used, and disclosed, and being transparent when things go wrong
  - Entrenching privacy and security protections into systems and processes to minimise the risks of harm to individuals
  - Taking a privacy by design approach to new programs or initiatives
  - Embedding a culture of privacy within the organisation, where every employee understands the importance of protecting privacy and their role in doing so
- All these elements, and others, work together to enhance trust in how an organisation handles personal information by ensuring the information is managed in a privacy protective manner from the moment it is collected to the moment it is no longer needed. I am sure these responsible information handling practices are ones your offices have advocated for countless times over.
  - Notably, as the world becomes increasingly data-driven, there has been a shift in the public's awareness of privacy and their expectations of how organisations should handle their information. Privacy is a growing concern.
  - We are all familiar with the harms arising from the misuse of personal information that have arguably been exacerbated by the digital age – algorithmic bias, discrimination, misinformation and disinformation campaigns, and the erosion of other human rights such as freedom of speech and freedom of expression.
  - It is no surprise then that we are seeing jurisdictions across the Asia Pacific and globally taking steps to create privacy frameworks that are fit for purpose in a digital age. Amongst other aspects, jurisdictions are exploring mechanisms that give individuals greater control over their information and offer stronger protections.
  - There is even a re-thinking of the definition of personal information given the impact of technological advancements on the types of information that can be

considered personal information. I think this is a welcome and timely development.

- Another development that I think needs to happen was highlighted earlier today by our colleague Commissioner Angelene Falk from the OAIC, namely that privacy laws should place less of a burden on *individuals* to navigate what can be very complex issues. If we think that those individuals are making a fully informed decision every time they agree to their personal information being collected, used and disclosed, we are fooling ourselves. And by fooling ourselves, we are failing them. This erodes trust.
- Information is more valuable than ever and will only continue increasing in value as the digital age progresses. As public trust helps an organisation gain the social licence needed to use personal information, it is to an organisation's benefit to adopt good privacy practices. This is a message my office delivers often when we speak with organisations about their programs.
- Of course, I can't end without mentioning the critical role we as privacy authorities play in helping build and maintain trust through the promotion and enforcement privacy rights. We must ensure that organisations continue to realise the benefits of the digital age in a way that protects privacy and meets community expectations.
- So what can we do? I would suggest two things.
- First, we can continue to discharge our regulatory functions by promoting and enforcing privacy rights effectively, efficiently and independently. This will come as no surprise and all of us are devoting our efforts to this every day.
- But second, I believe we should use our positions to influence governments to see respect for information rights generally, and respect for privacy rights specifically, as being far more than a compliance exercise. Respect for privacy is respect for a human right that leads to better societies. It leads to a better relationship between citizens and their government. It supports the ability for individuals to develop fully as autonomous human beings.
- And if that's too idealistic, then let's also point out that genuine respect for privacy builds trust. And with more trust, governments are better able to bring their people through tough times such as the last two and a half years.

- We never know when the next crisis is coming. But we can be sure that it will come. And when it does, I am sure that those societies where governments have earned the trust of their people will be better placed to put in place effective measures to respond.