



Digital platforms the way forward for NAB

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EXCLUSIVE

National Australia Bank may be counting the cost of the banking royal commission to its senior ranks and reputation, but the bank's digital and online consumer arm UBank is forging ahead with its tech ambitions with the launch of a digital home loan application assistant.

The platform, dubbed Mia, short for My Interactive Agent, is designed to help NAB customers get their home loan queries answered by a chatbot rather than a person.

UBank CEO Lee Hatton told *The Australian* the dramatic changes to NAB's leadership, with the departure of CEO Andrew Thorburn and chairman Ken Henry, had been a bitter pill to swallow. "We're of course saddened to lose two great leaders in Ken and Andrew. Both have been big supporters of UBank and we're a testament to their vision for the future of banking."

Mr Thorburn and Mr Henry, who announced their resignations last Friday, were singled out in the report handed down by commissioner Kenneth Hayne, which said NAB's leadership had been particularly poor in managing the bank's culture.

Appearing on ABC's 730 program on Friday, Mr Henry conceded NAB still had a long way to go to meet its aspirations of doing the right thing for its customers.

"There is a big gap. The gap, as I see it, is that NAB does aspire to do the right thing by every customer every time and everywhere and we're a long way from that," he said.

Geraldine McBride, NAB's non-executive director and founder of customer relationship management start-up MyWave, told *The Australian* the royal com-

mission had been a wake-up call not just for NAB but corporate Australia. "This is an issue not just for the banks but corporate Australia in general, with a lot of businesses struggling to put customers at the centre of their strategy," she said. "Customer experience matters and businesses don't always get it right."

Ms McBride, who joined NAB in 2015, was brought on to the bank's board to inject some technological acumen following her stints at IBM, Dell and software giant SAP.

She remained committed to staying on NAB's board and said the cultural shift under way across boardrooms in Australia would deliver dividends in time.

But Ms McBride said banks had so far missed the opportunity to better use their data to put customers first.

"You can argue that technology has so far created a gap between an organisation and their customers, and the royal commission has highlighted that delivering the right outcome to customers is what really matters," she said. "The back-end operational systems have been really well automated but none of the technology is designed to focus on customer experience. The systems sit in their own boxes and don't talk to each other."

Ms McBride's MyWave start-up is pitching itself as an intelligence layer that helps businesses connect the data dots and help

businesses personalise the customer experience. With the start-up eyeing a potential ASX listing later this year, Ms McBride said the technology focus of banks needed to shift from efficiency to service.

"Bringing human-like personalised experiences, just like the days when the bank manager remembered you and worked to get

you the best deal, at scale is crucial for any business," she said. "You have to deliver an outcome, not just another faceless transaction."

UBank, which celebrated its 10th birthday in October, has allowed NAB to explore ways to streamline retail banking services for customers. Ms Hatton said that despite the shadow cast by the royal commission, initiatives like Mia highlighted NAB's commitment to improving its overall culture.

"We have a group of around 220 people, the majority of whom sit in the same building in North Sydney, and for us culture has played a huge role in shaping UBank. And, there has always been an open exchange of learning and information," she said.

"The board visited us in July and was really inspired by our culture and taking away key [lessons]."

The Mia platform, developed in conjunction with New Zealand-based artificial intelligence start-up FaceMe, is the third AI-enabled project from UBank, following the introduction of RoboChat and RoboBrain over the past two years.

NAB said that, to date, AI-driven projects had been well received with four in five customers saying they're happy to use RoboChat — which has to date answered more than 50,000 questions, or about 86 a day since its launch.

Both platforms were built to help customers navigate the home loan application process and according to Ms Hatton, underpinned the development of Mia. "We need to leverage key technologies, like artificial intelligence, to tackle the typical questions customers ask, so we can free up our team to address the unique situations our customers need more support with, every

day," she said.



JAMES CROUCHER

Chief executive Lee Hatton at UBank's Sydney offices: 'We're of course saddened to lose two great leaders in Ken and Andrew'