

## Weaving the community web

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**A Kiwi has helped the World Bank focus on knowledge sharing.**

**By Kim Sbarcea**

There has been a recent revitalisation of the knowledge management field. What we might call the “first tsunami” left us awash with technology solutions which, more often than not, simply managed obsolete or decaying knowledge and offered the knowledge worker an array of databases full of “knowledge without context”.

The second tsunami focused on tying the concept of knowledge management (KM) to the language of conventional economic measurement, which gave it some legitimacy in the view of corporations who wanted to know what the impact of KM was on the bottom line. The terms “intellectual capital”, “balanced scorecard” and “knowledge assets” entered the KM parlance with the aim of accounting particularly for tacit knowledge. This emphasis led to knowledge being identified as a product or thing, rather than a practice or human process.

But the third tsunami of KM - a shift from the management of knowledge to a focus on enabling contexts and environments in which knowledge can be nurtured and flourished- is perhaps the current concern of KM professionals.

Dr Maris O’Rourke and the World Bank are good examples of this third wave of KM. Maris is an international education consultant and a director of e-spiderwebs.com, a small two person Web development company based in New Zealand.

Dr O’Rourke and her partner, Greg Mace, who is the Webmaster for e-spiderwebs.com, focus on individual entrepreneurs and community organisations. Maris and Greg help these one-person businesses and community organisations to set up better ways to share knowledge and build sustainable knowledge networks.

Dr O’Rourke is well qualified for this task. Her diverse background has allowed her to reach her understanding about KM and communities through trial and error, experience and practice, reading, listening and some great discussions with like-minded individuals along the way. Maris started her career as an apprentice engineer and after gaining some professional and trade qualifications worked for a number of years in the private sector with a variety of companies in a range of countries.

Dr O’Rourke attended the University of Auckland part-time as a mature student and gained a BA in Education and Psychology; an MA (with first class honours) in Psychology; a PhD in Education; teaching qualifications and became a registered psychologist- all while working and raising a family.

Her career then went into top speed when, after training teachers for 12 years and being an Executive Director in the New Zealand government, Maris was appointed the first Secretary for Education and Chief Executive of the Ministry of Education, also in New Zealand. In this role, she was responsible for managing a budget of \$4.3 billion and an asset base of \$5.1 billion.

## **FIRST PORT OF CALL**

Dr O'Rourke's entry into the KM and communities of practice world happened in 1995 when she was headhunted by the World Bank and moved to the United States. The World Bank is one of the largest sources of development assistance, focusing particularly on poverty reduction.

The new President of the World Bank, Jim Wolfensohn, found that the Bank was good on lending, limited on policy advice and poor on implementation. He issued a challenge to the Bank, namely that by the year 2000, the World Bank would become the first port of call for information and knowledge on development.

The Bank was reorganised and in 1996 a matrix management structure was put into place. To the traditional vertical level of 6 regions, a horizontal layer of five networks was added and within these networks were "families". These brought together for the first time, all the professionals in a particular field, such as the 350 people in Education which were Dr O'Rourke's client base.

The 5 networks were: Environmentally & Socially Sustainable Development; Finance and Private Sector and Infrastructure; Human Development; Operational Core Services; and Poverty Reduction and Economic Management.

The networks were asked to create a strategy; create and improve partnerships with outside organisations; provide staff training and development to maintain and improve the Bank's qualified experts; and to provide a system for knowledge sharing and learning. As Dr O'Rourke says these function were all "non-existent at the time". The overall aim was to turn the World Bank into a learning organisation where knowledge that had been created could be applied through teams, research, projects and partnerships. Knowledge would be distilled and shared within and outside the organisation "just in time" ie as and when needed.

To achieve this aim, Dr O'Rourke took some bold steps. The Human Development network was the first to set up and her Education group agreed to pioneer setting up and running of a knowledge sharing system.

Dr O'Rourke prefers the term "knowledge sharing" and does not utter the term "knowledge management". She considers "knowledge that can be managed is "old" knowledge and may be useful to the business but is essentially redundant, possibly obsolescent and, at its worst, trivial". In other words, Dr O'Rourke subscribes to the school of thought that prefers to say knowledge has an active social life which allows it to change, mutate, renew, grow and be continually reconstructed. Dr O'Rourke believes knowledge to be a process rather than a product and is the result of human interaction.

## **LET THEM RAVE**

Her first step towards fostering a learning and sharing environment was to run focus groups. Using groupware (so that anonymity was preserved), Dr O'Rourke started off by asking the 350 people working in Education across the Bank one simple question: "What do you need to do your job better?".

She let them rave and type away and, from this, she identified key content areas that people were wanting to find knowledge on, some of which were technology, girl's education, early childhood, teaching and learning, economics of education and school health. Dr O'Rourke discovered that no work was being done in these areas and that "policy" staff were individually doing their own thing. Her next step was to create space conducive to developing a learning ecosystem. She took the Education people to another building, tore down the walls and created bright, "Rio Red" coloured open spaces. Teams were formed around the technical content or themed areas identified through

the Groupware exercise, and team leaders who were bright, positive and keen were selected, rather than the established “gurus”. Each team was provided with its own space and half of their budget and was asked to manage both in their own way.

As Dr O’Rourke says, she let “1,000 flowers bloom in order to get some different models and see what worked well and set up weekly times these could be shared. We also identified the key tasks (often boring but necessary) all operational Bank staff had to do and provided common tools and techniques to make these easier, quicker and more efficient”.

A key result of this work was the setting up of a help desk/advisory service for “just in time” advice as well as the emergence of several communities of practitioners eg Distance and Open Learning; Early Child Development. Eventually, hundreds of these thematic groups or communities of practice were set up.

## **LEADERSHIP**

Dr O’Rourke learned a number of lessons. Perhaps her primary one is this: “Like any change, all this takes leadership - implementing KS (knowledge sharing) is all about change management and needs leadership, lots of “cause champions” and relentless communication. I find that no-one seems to hear anything until they’ve heard it at least three times in three different ways and preferably from three different sources”. She discovered that the type of leadership necessary was “quiet leadership” where the leader doesn’t know everything and has the capacity to nurture innovative people and ideas.

Her other lessons? Launching and nurturing communities is not easy. It involves a lot of effort and cannot be produced by mandates and top down control. Communities are bottom-up, grass roots movements of people who voluntarily come together.

Decentralisation of resources and accountability is perhaps the best model for community development. The World Bank spent approximately 3 per cent of its total budget on knowledge sharing, compared to 5-10 per cent in private enterprise. The various communities throughout the Bank were able to raise additional resources from other sources. Dr O’Rourke strongly feels that “decentralisation helps you attain complexity from simplicity”.

But decentralised communities take on a life of their own which is both a strength and a weakness. The community may be at the mercy of an authoritarian leader or there may be a core group who believe they know it all and will effectively kill all other ideas and approaches. Other groups may keep their knowledge and findings to themselves and sit on solutions or be secretive and non-communicative. Dr O’Rourke’s answer to these pitfalls is quite simple- ditch the ineffective or troublesome communities, although she points out that they are often hard to remove.

## **KNOWLEDGE JOURNEY**

Her work at the World Bank reached its most successful stage when the knowledge sharing model she helped develop was taken Bank-wide. Dr O’Rourke stresses that the “knowledge journey” went through a number of stages and that cultural change takes time. Success doesn’t happen overnight.

Maris O’Rourke left the World Bank after five and a half years, following a moment of epiphany whilst travelling. Her philosophy on life in her own words? “Live, love, laugh and learn every day - if it’s not fun and you’re not learning, don’t do it.”

She is clearly applying this philosophy well to her new company and her personal life. Having just returned from consulting work in Jakarta and Jordan, she and her family will be taking a break over summer to trek in Nepal and Thailand.

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### ***Acknowledgements***

This article first appeared in Image and Data Manage on 13/4/2003.